Every Failing Sun
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by ontheskyidance

Summary

"You make for an interesting story, Gerard."
"Exploiting the lives of poor performers?" Gerard scoffed, but there was no real bite to his words.
"I prefer to say I offer a chance for the poor performers' voices to be heard. And I would like to hear yours."

Gerard tells Frank his life story.

Notes

Warnings in tags. It gets dark.

Thank you Pixie for being the best beta ever ily.

See the end of the work for more notes

"Absolutely not."

Travis whined, making Frank roll his eyes as he slid the chair away from his desk. Travis had that annoying habit of grabbing his arm when he wanted something (which usually worked, mainly because Frank really didn't appreciate having his forearm squeezed by a guy who went to the gym

four times a week), and he was too close for comfort. However, the wheels of the chair caught against the ugly yellow carpet, and Frank was nearly sent flying back. He didn't even have it in him to be angry about it anymore; it had been a shitty week.

"Come on, Frank," Travis pleaded. "What do you want in exchange? I'll do anything. I'm not above begging here."

"A thousand bucks."

"Done."

Frank's eyebrows flew up.

"Dude."

"I'm desperate!" Travis threw his hands up with a groan. "Abi will kill me if I miss the anniversary dinner, and it's not like you have better plans."

"Rude."

Not that Frank had plans because, obviously, he didn't. He rarely did these days. Frank probably wouldn't be leaving the house at all if it wasn't for their job policy forcing them to show up in the office once a week. He found his living room couch way too comfortable to exchange it for restaurants, pubs, cinemas, clubs, or whatever people his age did on Friday evenings. He couldn't even recall the last time he had gone somewhere for fun. Probably almost a year before when his mother had come to visit, and Frank had taken her out to eat.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Travis continued. "I'm sure a guy like you will appreciate it."

"A guy like me."

Travis gestured at him.

"You know…"

"Gay," Frank supplied.

"Right. That."

Travis didn't exactly have a problem with Frank's sexuality. He had used to when they had first met, and it had come out that Frank still wasn't married at the age of forty-one, which in turn had led to a ground-breaking discovery that Frank wasn't into women in the first place and just hadn't found a good guy to put a ring on him. It had been a rough couple of days in the office, working on the article together, with Travis keeping a safe distance from him and looking utterly ridiculous when passing him notes, trying to stop their hands from touching.

Frank had grown bored with it really fast, too. He had told Travis he wasn't his type and described, in perhaps too many details, exactly the type he was interested in. That had done it, at last, and Travis had stopped freaking out every time Frank had breathed in his direction. To this day, however, he was reserved when talking about it. Frank didn't press him and didn't reproach him for it. Born when and where they had been, he understood Travis had been taught to fear homosexuals, and he was doing his best not to perceive Frank through the lenses of deep-rooted homophobia. As long as he made an effort, it was enough. They were best friends for a reason, after all.

“I could have taken the article, you know,” Frank pointed at him, leaning back in his chair. “I told you I could do it.”

“Nah, I wanted to learn.”

“And what did you learn so far?”

“That gay clubs are *really* not my scene.”

Frank grinned at him, leaning over to grab a pen from the desk and play with it mindlessly. He could only imagine the things Travis had been forced to see. He didn’t frequent these places anymore, but he had when he had been younger and sometimes, things were taken to an extreme.

“Assuming I do this, and I’m not saying I will,” Frank started slowly, knowing fully that he had already lost. Travis lit up like a goddamn Christmas tree, and Frank hated himself for being such a good friend. “What’s the objective?”

“I owe you, buddy, I owe you big time.”

“Travis,” he snapped his fingers a couple of times. “Objective. Focus.”

“There’s this club downtown called *House*. A really niche place with a particular clientele. Rich clientele. They don’t call it a strip club, even though I swear it totally is. They call it a cabaret club or whatever.”

“These do exist,” Frank rolled his eyes again. He personally hadn’t heard of *House* before, but then again, the journalist job didn’t exactly put him in the rich category, either. “Okay, so what about it?”

“I managed to get to the owner, some guy named Brian. I wanted to interview some of the employees there, but most of them aren’t on a contract. It’s mostly freelance, apparently, and he assured me most of them wouldn’t talk to me. They like to stay undercover, so to speak.”

“But?”

“But,” Travis leaned over his desk more firmly, lifting a finger and pausing dramatically. “We may have a chance with this one guy who performs there on Fridays. He appears to be well-known in the field and has built a bit of a reputation for himself, doing these performances for a good portion of two decades, and he may be willing to talk.”

“*May* be willing.”

“It’s not guaranteed,” Travis shrugged. “But he’s experienced. Brian said he could provide a cool story about how different the scene is now from what it was in the past, and I agree with him here.”

“Okay,” Frank ran his hands down his face with a tired groan. “So what do you wanna ask him?”

“Oh, you know, the general things. How the industry is treating him, the ups and downs of being a performer, stuff like that. I’m sure you can figure it out.”

“Sure,” it was Frank’s turn to shrug. “Coffee’s on you for the next month, Trav, and I don’t mean the shitty one from downstairs. Starbucks. Daily.”

“You’re not here daily.”

Frank grinned wider, fixing his glasses with the tip of his finger.

“I’ll write my home address for you,” he offered. “And you write down where *House* is for me. You talked to this guy already? Does he know you’re coming to interview him?”

“Brian’s supposed to tell him.”

Frank didn’t like that. From his experience, he knew that if someone was supposed to tell someone something, it usually meant they didn’t, and he would be scrutinized and most likely kicked in the shin for his troubles. He didn’t trust others to deliver messages for him, and when he set interviews, he made damn sure to do it personally. Travis was messy like that, however, and Frank had already made up his mind that he would go.

He wasn’t excited, per se, but he thought that could be good for him. Even if the interview didn’t work out, at least he could get a drink and enjoy a performance. He had never been a fan of cabaret clubs (or striptease clubs, for that matter), but he liked that Travis was doing the article. The world deserved to read a detailed description of the struggles of gay artists in New York and how, even in the present day and time, they were still forced to hide in niche clubs. He wanted them to get the recognition they deserved, and it worked well for Travis to be surrounded by the subject, too. Maybe next time Frank offered drinks, he wouldn’t look at him like he grew a pair of horns.

“Alright,” he sighed, sliding his chair closer to the desk. “You can have your fucking anniversary dinner, what the hell. I’ll go.”

Travis threw his fist up in a gesture of victory.

“Dude, yes, I love you.”

“Now you’re saying it. Wait till you have to travel for thirty minutes to get me my Starbucks.”

Travis leaned back with a relieved smile and, for good measure, smacked Frank across the head. Frank would have punched him back in any other circumstances, but when the idea of doing an interview was rolling around in his head, his work mode was on, and he could barely see Travis anymore. Man, it had been years since Frank had done a spontaneous interview with someone. He didn’t know if he remembered how to form questions unless he had them all written down.

“Nine in the evening, sharp,” Travis told him, scribbling an address on one of Frank’s neon sticker notes. “And for the love of God, Frank, show up in something different than these ripped jeans.”

“Like you would know what to wear to a gay club.”

“A lot of leather, apparently,” Travis winced, making Frank laugh. “But I’m serious, this is a renowned place. Try to fit in.”

Frank glanced at the clock on the bottom of his laptop’s screen. Four in the afternoon was not that late, but it was Friday afternoon, and he just *knew* public transport would be delayed today. Defeated, he closed the file with the article he was working on – some last-minute piece about the upcoming Grammy’s and how this entire peer-recognized award thing was not only overrated but also highly corrupted – and promptly shut his laptop screen. Doing Travis a favor meant he would have to work during the weekend to get his own article up and running by Monday morning, but that was fine. He really didn’t make plans, not even on weekends.

Gazing down at himself, he realized Travis was also acutely right. If his idea was correct about what kind of place *House* was, the ripped jeans wouldn’t do. Frank didn’t even remember if he owned a suit anymore.

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As it turned out, Frank did not, in fact, own a suit. When he stumbled out of the cab at quarter to nine in the evening, he did so in black jeans – at least these weren't ripped – and a prayer in his head that it would be enough. He didn't do well in posh places. Being a child of 80s punk rock Newark, he owned exactly one white shirt and one black tie, and it was only because he had been forced to go to aunt Marie's seventeenth wedding four years prior. He hated these things, too. Collars suffocated him, elegant belt buckles dug into his stomach, and he didn't even want to think about oxfords. All of it was so out of the league of the disorganized journalist Frank proudly declared himself to be that he couldn't be more off. *House* and places like it were not his scene. If there was no spilled beer on the ground and at least three drunk people in the bathroom, Frank wasn't interested.

Travis hadn't given him enough time to read about *House,* either, but as soon as Frank arrived, he could tell he was not going to feel good inside. Definitely not a strip club, then. Where he would have expected flashing neons inviting people in, he found black, curly letters illuminated only by a subdued, white light. Instead of seeing pictures of performers, the high windows of the club were clad in black velvet curtains. Nothing about the exterior indicated what might await him inside, but Frank instantly felt out of place as he got closer to the entrance. Fuck, even the bodyguard looked like he had been taken straight out of the men's magazine in his immaculate, black suit.

Cursing in his head, Frank adjusted the hold he had on his working bag – the *elegant* one, might he add, the one he had only used a couple of times before when he had to interview influential people in important places – and wondered if he needed an invitation. Travis hadn't mentioned any, but it didn't look like he could just march inside. Screw coffee for a month; he deserved a three-course meal for eternity for doing this.

The bodyguard looked unimpressed for the most part as he loomed over Frank when he approached. If Frank didn't know better, he'd say he was bored. He scrutinized him and cocked his eyebrow at the sight of his bag.

"You're the reporter guy?"

Huh, so the manager had been true to his word.

"That's me," Frank grinned wider than it was strictly necessary and stopped himself from reaching out his hand at the last moment. The bodyguard grunted something in response and gestured at Frank's bag.

"Open."

It was hard not to tell the guy to fuck off as he unceremoniously went through Frank's stuff, probably bending the pages in his notebook and unscrewing his pens, not to mention the camera Frank had stuffed at the very bottom. It had cost a lot. He would lose it if some puffed-up model-looking asshole as much as scratched it. He was aware that he was fidgeting, people passing by throwing him weirded-out looks, and the more he looked at them, the more ready he was to just turn around and head straight home. Fuck Travis and his wedding anniversary, Frank didn't fit in at all. His colorful tattoos and untucked shirt with the sleeves rolled up made him look like a teenager compared to the elegant crowd filing into the club. Just one suit after another, each looking more expensive than the last one, and fuck, was that an actual tux?

“You’re good,” the bodyguard thrust the bag back into Frank’s arms. “You have the authorization to go backstage, but only after the performance, and you can take photos without touching, or I will rip your arms out. Got it?”

Jesus, what *was* this place?

“Sure,” Frank shrugged, trying very hard to remain impassive. The sooner he got inside, the sooner he could stop feeling like the bodyguard would actually punch him in the face.

Just how wrong he was to think being in the club itself would be any better.

It was dark inside. Dark enough for Frank to nearly stumble over his feet going downstairs into the basement of the building. Mellow, quiet music trickled through the space, and it was nothing like any of the pubs and clubs he had ever been to. It didn’t boom through the room in deafening volumes, didn’t immediately make him want to cover his ears for a moment to adjust to it. It reminded him more of a shopping mall on a lazy afternoon with some generic songs being played, not loud enough to make out the words but just enough to make him annoyed.

This didn’t make him annoyed. When he descended fully, he was welcomed with a vast hall with tables situated far from each other to ensure privacy and a massive stage in the center. He tried not to smirk as he took it in. Of course, there would be a dancing pole in the middle; he didn’t know what he expected, but what caught him off guard was the fact that the lights were not shining on it. Instead, the beam of blueish light fell on the stylish chair situated closer to the edge, its back facing the room.

He picked a table closest to the stage. He hated that, too – he could hardly see in the semi-darkness of the room, but he could hear just fine, and the hushed whispers of other guests as he pushed his way between their chairs were enough to alert him to what was going on. No one called him a pervert or a newbie to his face, but it was a close thing. Apparently, it was customary to keep some distance, but Frank felt hot under his collar and couldn’t give two shits about what New York’s gay elite thought of him. He pulled his camera out and hung it on his shoulder for good measure, just to establish the role he was playing here.

That made people shut up, and Frank nearly chuckled. Right, who was the pervert now? He was only here to do his job.

It took a surprisingly short time for Frank to understand that the distance was kept for a reason.

He got as comfortable as he could in front of the stage, putting his notebook down on the table along with his lucky pen and a camera. No one offered him a drink, and he didn’t go to get one – he was working, after all, and there would be time for drinking after the interview was done. The time seemed to flow slowly, the mellow music coming from the speakers lulling him to sleep, the warmth of the club enveloping him like a thick blanket. The performance hadn’t started, even though Frank’s watch clearly informed him almost a quarter of an hour had passed since nine o’clock stroke, and he had to hold back a yawn a couple of times as he gazed up at the empty chair. He was bored – plain and simple. If he were at home, he could be getting close and personal with a bowl of popcorn, spreading his legs in his sweatpants instead of sweating in an uncomfortable shirt amid rich pricks. Once again, he was reminded why he didn’t leave the house other than to go to work, and he heaved a sigh, shaking his head a little. This was excruciating. He loved his job, but moments like that reminded him why he declined most interview offers.

He was halfway through a poor-piss doodle of a chair, taking up most of his notebook page when the music suddenly stopped. At first, he almost didn’t register it – it had been such an ambient noise Frank hadn’t been paying conscious attention to it – and it was only a murmur of excitement

traveling through a room that made him lift his head from above the drawing and frown. The stage was still empty, raising Frank's eyebrows in a silent question. He turned around, hopeful something more exciting than a display of upholstery was happening behind him and managed three slow blinks to take in the unchanging scenery of a club before the lights suddenly went out.

A singular beam of purple light flashed when Frank's head snapped back, illuminating the chair. In the tense silence of the club, he realized the stage was no longer empty.

The first second he thought he must have had the wrong address and had accidentally ended up in a regular strip club. He squinted, throwing a cautious look around, but the audience hadn't changed – rich men in suits, which Frank could easily interpret either way if a couple a few tables away wasn't wrapped around each other like two octopuses. He dragged his eyes back to the chair on stage and did a double take – no, he hadn't gotten it wrong. No matter how rapidly he blinked, the image didn't change, and it took a lot of staring and his neurons firing signals for him to understand that it genuinely wasn't a woman he was seeing.

Frank took it all in again: the broad shoulders hidden behind a white silk shirt, the soft, brown hair falling onto the man's shoulders, the forward tilt of his head. He was everything Frank *hadn't* expected to see. There were no bulging muscles, crew-cut, oozing masculinity, and, most importantly, no naked skin. Where he expected flashy, neon lingerie or almost vulgar leather, he found elegant attire. His fingers reached over the table, pulling the camera closer. He lifted it and noticed the trembling of his wrist just as the first beat of music nearly shattered his eardrums.

He pressed the button and took the photo at the exact moment when the man's legs, so far hidden behind the chair, splayed widely to the sides.

Frank didn't look down to check the photo he had taken, but he knew it would probably become his favorite one to date.

The skin was there then, and the thin tights sliding over the man's lean calves were perhaps more erotic than if he was stark naked. Frank felt himself gulp as he saw how the muscles flexed beneath the flimsy fabric in an involuntary spasm, from the protruding knees all the way down to the heeled boots the man had on. He arched his legs further out, leaning the weight on his tiptoes, the heel lifting in the air, and Frank had to put the camera down before he dropped it on the ground.

"Don't *be scared, now*."

Frank was so screwed. When he had told Travis that he had heard of cabaret clubs before, he meant precisely that – he had *heard* of them, but he had never been to one before. Coming in, he hadn't known what he should expect but what he was seeing and hearing was not it. Only then did he see a cable slithering over the ground and curling over the chair, connected to the microphone the man held in his hand, and he realized the voice he heard was not a recording. It wasn't just a striptease – if it was that, to begin with – but a whole performance. The performer's voice sounded sweet coming through the speakers, not overly high but not low, either, as he sang the first few lines of the song. And fuck, he was *good*.

His shoulders shook, heels dragging across the floor as he closed his legs again. He rolled his body upwards with surprising ease, standing up and pulling away from the chair, one of his legs bending and coming to rest on the seat of it. Frank couldn't listen to the lyrics – something about a muse, he thought, but he wouldn't have bet his life on it – and only heard how his breath hitched when the man on stage turned around.

The heeled boot pressed lightly to the back of the chair and sent it flying down onto the ground, the calf muscles tensing again beneath the tights, and Frank's gaze traveled slowly up. Down from the

chic leather shoe, up over the expanse of skin, stopping at the edge of the skirt – a *skirt*, how the hell was Frank still alive? – and then higher, over the silk shirt and a frivolous, red scarf. The man's hair was partially over his face, covering his forehead and the sides of his cheeks, but his eyes were vivid in the semi-darkness of the club, shining with mischievous, almost mocking humor. They were beautiful, just like the rest of him, and they were glued to Frank's face.

Oh. *Oh.* So that was why he should have stayed in the back.

The man walked around the chair in a few long strides, possessing a grace Frank wouldn't be able to accomplish even with a gun to his head. One foot stepped in front of the other, the gentle sway of his hips emphasized by the fabric of his skirt, and the smile never disappeared as he came closer to the edge of the stage. Frank had somehow missed the fact that there was a mic stand there and ended up gulping, head thrown back to take in the performer in front of him, as the mic got secured in its place.

That gave the man two free hands, and yes, Frank maybe should have seen it coming. The way the scarf came undone under the nimbling fingers seemed almost too easy, the fabric sliding over the man's delicate wrists and then parting completely. It slid down his chest and over the skirt. Frank had to drag his eyes back up forcibly and regretted it immediately when he noticed the buttons of the shirt coming undone next.

"*You can be my muse.*"

They didn't all get unbuttoned. The man stopped halfway down, giving Frank merely a peek of his pale, smooth chest. The mic was back in his hand then, and he didn't even wobble as he wrapped himself around the mic stand and circled around it. It ended up pressed between his shoulder blades, something Frank couldn't quite see, and the man's arm came up so he could curl his hand over the top. It slid between his fingers, and Frank felt faint when he saw that lean body slipping down. The man's hips rolled from one side to the other, fingers splayed wide as he slid down the stand onto his knees. They were pressed together, careful not to show too much of what was hidden beneath the black fabric of the skirt, but the smoothness of the move was enough to send Frank's mind reeling.

He couldn't see what was there, but he *wanted* to.

The man's back arched, head falling back to expose the long column of his neck, and Frank wanted to know how the thin coat of his sweat would taste. His knees spread on the ground, pulling the skirt taut around his thighs, and Frank wanted to know what sound the tights would make if he were to rip them from his body. He threw his head back, his hair falling over his eyes, and Frank *needed* to know how soft it would be if he were to grab a handful.

The man's free hand caught the stage as he lowered himself to the ground. He crawled his way towards Frank – because somehow Frank came to a terrifying realization that he had become the main target of the performer for the evening – and settled right on the edge of the stage with a cheeky grin. Frank didn't know where to look. The way the man curved his back pushed his hips higher and subsequently made the fabric of his shirt part more when his chest hovered mere inches above the floor, and there were his legs, crossed one over the other, boots dangling in the air.

A tiny voice in Frank's head, so far only whispering lewd things to him, started screaming.

The man knew what he was doing to Frank; there was no doubt about that. He was still smiling when he rolled his hips down, and Frank swallowed so hard he was sure he dislocated something in his throat.

He was almost grateful when the man rocked back. His knees were still spread wide as he rubbed his hand up his thigh, fingers teasing first the top and then the side before sliding to the soft inside and higher, higher still. They stopped just beneath the hem of the skirt, and Frank swore he could feel the warmth of the man's skin on his own palm – how hot the air would be between his thighs, how tender the skin would be if he were to put his mouth there, how easily it would bruise if he were to bite down. He looked up, their eyes locking together, and the man before him did the unspeakable.

He winked at Frank, the corner of his lips curling up. His head fell back again as he rocked his hips up and forward, right into the press of his hand, and lifted the one holding a mic to his mouth. The unmistakable sound of a moan bounced through the room.

Frank was about to have a heart attack.

The rhythmical, almost military-like drum sequence came from the speakers next. It was so unexpected not to hear the man's voice that Frank's eyes shot a look to his side. It made the trance he was in end abruptly, his mind going blank for a split second as he tried to gather himself back together, and when he gazed back at the stage, the man was no longer kneeling. He was standing then, chest rising and falling rapidly beneath the shirt's white fabric, and his tights had ripped across his knees where they had rubbed over the rough floor.

One of his eyebrows raised in a question Frank didn't understand just as the music came to a halt. The room erupted with applause – well deserved, Frank would have thought if he could think at all – and the man's sly smile was back as he leaned back, cocking his hip. He lifted his hand without another word and pressed a kiss to his fingers, sending it toward the crowd a second later. Not just to Frank anymore, either; his eyes moved across the room as if he remembered himself that there were other people there apart from the awkward, underdressed journalist. Frank wanted to feel disappointed and quickly dismissed the thought, scoffing at himself. It had been a performance. A damn good one, but a performance, nonetheless. There was nothing to be disappointed over.

A flash of color caught his eye. The red fabric flew through the air, light enough to rotate a couple of times, and Frank followed its path until it descended upon the top of his table, settling lightly over his camera. When he reached over to touch it, the scarf was still warm from the man's body heat.

His head snapped up, coming face to face with an empty stage, the only proof of the performer ever being there in the first place being the knocked-over chair and the scarf in Frank's grip. He looked down at it and closed his eyes for a second.

He needed to interview this guy next. He didn't know how he was supposed to do that.

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A different security guy led Frank away from his table and the stage. He threw one questioning look at the scarf Frank was still clutching in his hand when he saw him, but all Frank could do was shrug.

"I should give it back," he said, and the buffy-looking guy seemed to accept it. He looked almost uncomfortable to be a part of it all of a sudden, whatever *it* was, and Frank had to double his efforts to keep up with him.

The club wasn't big, and the backstage seemed to be even smaller, the dressing rooms just a short corridor away from the bar where Frank wished he could have made a pitstop. He needed to drink something, be it water to cool down or a few shots of whiskey to calm down his trembling hands, but this was apparently not a part of his job description for tonight. He got ushered in front of a door in a matter of seconds, and the bag hanging from his shoulder suddenly weighed more than Frank remembered. He threw a questioning – or panicked, he wasn't sure – gaze at the security guy, hoping he could tell him what the hell he was supposed to be doing there, but he was faced with the guy's broad back as he strolled quickly back to the central part of the club.

Traitor.

Frank was, however, not a coarse man and still remembered some things his good mother had taught him when he was a child. He took a deep breath, told himself to get it together, and knocked gently on the door.

"Come in."

God, he wasn't sure if he wanted to.

The inside of the dressing room was surprisingly bright. Frank had expected almost the same dimness as the stage, everything covered in mystery and half left for the imagination, so he needed to squint his eyes against the blinding fluorescent lamps hanging from the ceiling. The door clicked quietly behind him as he quickly shoved it shut upon realizing he probably shouldn't be exposing the changing performer to the eyes of random by-passers and then cringed at himself. The man would not be naked if he had told him to come in; he really needed to get his mind out of the gutter.

And he wasn't. When Frank's eyes adjusted to the light, he spotted the man's back a few feet away. He was turned towards the vanity table, head hanging low as he typed something on the phone clutched in his hand, and the skirt was nowhere to be seen. Although the white shirt was still dangling loosely from his shoulders, his legs were now hidden in black sweatpants, and the heels had been replaced with slip-on trainers. Frank trained his eyes on how his shoulder blades moved beneath the fabric when he exhaled deeply after a second or two and put the phone away, spinning around.

There was no saying which of them was more surprised upon seeing each other.

The white shirt was now parted entirely, all buttons undone. Frank tried his best not to gape like an idiot, but he couldn't help staring. The man's prominent collarbones peeked from beneath his skin, his nipples pink and hard from the cold, and the slight bump of his stomach didn't bear even a single hair. Neither did the rest of him, now that Frank could take it all in. His chest was smooth, and so were the arms he could see where the shirt's sleeves had been rolled up. He looked up again; sure enough, the neck, chin, and sides of the man's face had all been shaven clean, leaving only sleek, pale skin.

Thankfully Frank was a journalist, not an artist, or he might have been inclined to call him a work of art.

"Oh," a familiar voice said, and Frank couldn't help noticing how different it sounded from what he had experienced in the audience. It was airy, almost shy; a striking contrast to the lustful notes the man had sung a few minutes ago. "You must be Travis."

Frank finally shook the shock away, remembering he still had a job to do here. He could daydream about the man when he was safely back home.

“Frank, actually,” he met the man’s eyes – hazel, he noticed – and sent him an awkward smile. “It’s Travis’ wedding anniversary today, he couldn’t make it.”

“Good priorities,” the man smiled slightly, and that, too, was so very different from how he had grinned on stage. He shrugged his shoulders, dislodging the shirt to cover his chest more, and extended a hand to Frank. “Nice to meet you then, Frank. My name’s Gerard.”

Frank had his hand almost clasped around this slim wrist when he realized he was still holding the scarf.

“Oh, right,” he froze. He was not an awkward type, he was *never* the awkward type, but suddenly he forgot how to operate his own body and could just stare at the fabric in his hand. His mind didn’t supply any solution on how to shake Gerard’s hand and hold the scarf simultaneously, and he found himself gazing down at his limbs in confusion. It didn’t occur to him to shift the scarf to his other hand.

“You brought it back? How sweet of you,” Gerard gushed over it, a smile spreading on his face as he gripped the hem of the fabric instead of Frank’s palm. He pulled it gently out of Frank’s hold, and Frank had to stop himself from actively pouting when he no longer felt it against his skin. Sue him; it was a lovely scarf. “You’re alright? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“Huh?” Frank’s head snapped up. “Oh, sorry. Yes. Just… thinking about work.”

Gerard’s cocked eyebrows told him he didn’t believe a thing he heard, but he let it slide.

“Brian told me you wanted an interview, but that’s as far as he went. You mind telling me a little more about it while I finish getting changed?”

Changed? *Here?*

No, of course not here. Gerard threw Frank an amused look over his shoulder and disappeared behind a curtain in the corner, pulling it tightly shut. Which, if Frank was completely honest, made absolutely no sense. He was mostly dressed already, and it wasn’t like Frank hadn’t raked his gaze all over his chest already, so unless there was a nasty scar on his back he didn’t want Frank to see, it was pointless. He decided not to comment on it, however, because he didn’t trust himself not to beg Gerard to just shrug the shirt off entirely and possibly his sweatpants, too, and cleared his throat instead.

“Travis is doing a massive piece on the gay community in New York,” he explained slowly, fiddling with the edge of his bag. “The main focus is the artists of various kinds. He’s interviewed some painters, a photographer, I think, and a few musicians.”

“Way to assume someone’s sexual orientation,” Gerard’s voice sounded from behind the curtain.

Frank winced at that. Was he assuming things? Or had Travis assumed things? It was a gay club, sure, but that didn’t have to mean anything when it came to the performers. As far as he was concerned, Gerard could be as straight as an arrow and married to a woman with three kids and a dog to complete the household. He didn’t *think* he was, but he would be clueless if he had to pinpoint exactly what made him feel so.

“I don’t… Okay.”

Gerard’s face was split with a smile when he walked out. The white shirt was gone, replaced with a simple black t-shirt and a camo jacket, and Frank still couldn’t shake off a feeling that he looked stunning.

“I fall under the umbrella, don’t worry.”

“Do you?”

Gerard grinned, throwing what remained of his shirt onto the vanity table.

“Sure,” he shrugged. “I don’t care as long as you’re a good person, that’s my philosophy. What about you, Frank?”

If he weren’t so utterly embarrassed, Frank would laugh. “I’m here, aren’t I? Isn’t it obvious?”

“Well,” Gerard stretched the word out, his voice wavering a little. “I was supposed to meet with Travis, who is apparently having dinner with his wife, so maybe not so obvious.”

Frank couldn’t imagine how Travis would feel if he was in his shoes but was dying to know, nonetheless. Gerard’s performance had been good. Better than good, actually – it had been flawless, and even if Frank weren’t so utterly smitten by the same gender and so badly attracted to male bodies, he would have probably still found it alluring. He was no expert, and neither was Travis, but he thought they would have both been able to appreciate the artistry of it with a slight difference of Travis not feeling like he might puke from stressing over it. Or quite the opposite. Frank couldn’t help smiling, imagining how Travis’ eyes would widen if he got smacked in the face with Gerard’s scarf.

“He asked me to cover for him for a reason,” was the answer Frank decided to provide. Gerard didn’t seem entirely satisfied, a frown making its way onto his face, but Frank could not give more details. What more was there to say, *can I please get on my knees for you?* “Do you want to know anything else before we begin?”

“I’d like to see that picture you took if you don’t mind.”

How did Gerard know he had taken a picture was beyond Frank. He hardly remembered doing it himself, not to mention checking if it was any good. As far as he was concerned, it could have been a blur of colors with nothing concrete showing, and he became jittery when he reached for his camera. Why? He had no idea. It wasn’t like he was trying to impress Gerard – although he totally was, he just wasn’t successful – and it wasn’t like Gerard was the photography expert here. He regretted not taking more photos now that he thought about it and cursed himself for getting so distracted he had forgotten about the work he was supposed to be doing.

He flipped the camera on nonetheless and pulled the latest photo onto the small display.

It wasn’t bad. Hell – it was great. There was a little motion blur caused by Gerard lifting his head and his hair flying through the air, but the rest was exactly as Frank had imagined. Gerard’s legs stood out against the dark background, his skin appearing pale even beneath the opaque tights, and the polish of his boots reflected the spotlights. From that angle, a tiny bit of the red scarf was visible, just an inch next to Gerard’s jawline, and the quality was so good – thanks to Frank spending way too much on that goddamn camera – that he could almost feel the fabric of Gerard’s shirt under his fingertips.

He ensured the screen wouldn’t go dark, checked three times if he hadn’t accidentally switched to an earlier photo, and then turned the camera towards Gerard.

Gerard was, unfortunately, utterly adorable when he squinted to take a look. Possessing none of his stage spirits, he huffed a breath to get his hair away from his eyes and leaned in, curling a loose strand behind his ear. Up close like this, Frank noticed things the stage had hidden so well – the

lines of shallow wrinkles on his cheeks and around his eyes, the chapped skin of his lips, the prominent veins on his hands as he grabbed the camera to tilt it slightly back. He was still beautiful, Frank didn't even try to disprove that, but the eroticism wasn't oozing from every pore of his body. It was strange. Frank had been counting on the confident, alluring persona always to be there.

"You're a talented photographer," Gerard said after a moment.

Frank snorted slightly, flipping the camera off. "You're a talented performer."

"Is this the word you're going with in the article? Performer?"

"It wasn't supposed to be," Frank agreed. "Stripper was more what we – or Travis, really – were looking for, but I don't think we can use that now. You've hardly undressed."

"Sorry about that," Gerard's laughter sounded genuine, the wrinkles deepening as he smiled. "I'm less into the strip part and more into the tease part."

Frank regarded him slowly as he found a spot in the corner of the room. It wouldn't be comfortable to write with the notebook on his knee, but he had worked in worse conditions throughout his career.

"Has it always been like that?" he asked as Gerard plumbed down onto the chair by the vanity table, his long legs stretched in front of him, ankles locked. "Or is it a recent development?"

"I wouldn't say recent. It's been a good couple of years since I've decided I would be going with the sort of performances you've witnessed tonight, but I have my fair share of experience with what you'd consider a typical striptease, too."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Many things," Gerard shrugged. "I know you're digging for dirt, though, so I can tell you it gets harder and harder to keep an audience the older you become. Sure, some people will still want to see you take your clothes off, but not most of them. What was sexy when I was twenty or twenty-five is no longer sexy now. I changed tactics, so to speak. If I just tease my audience, I have bigger chances of gaining their attention than if I flung my shirt off in their faces."

"How old are you now?"

"Forty-five."

"Shut up."

Gerard smiled again, cocking his head to the side.

"I am, though."

"You—" no, Frank couldn't quite wrap his head around it. "You don't look forty-five."

"How old do I look?"

"Thirty-something?" Frank offered. Honestly, he wouldn't be able to estimate Gerard's age if he was paid to do it. He could see the signs that he wasn't as young as twenty anymore, but he had this boyish charm about him that surely placed him in lower numbers than mid-forties. Frank also completely disagreed with what Gerard was saying. There was no way this man wouldn't have had

an audience if he still did a striptease. He was so alluring and erotic that Frank was certain flocks of people would have come to see him undress, regardless of his age. “Early thirties would be my guess, mid at most.”

“Thanks, but that’s old times,” Gerard chuckled. “How old are *you*, though?”

“Forty-one. What, I don’t look my age either?”

“No, no, you do.”

“Oh wow, thanks.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Gerard looked at him pointedly. “Would you seriously prefer to be considered a teenager or a college student still?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“No, absolutely not.”

“Elaborate, please.”

Gerard lifted his hand, the pad of his thumb resting against his lips. He started nibbling on it as he thought, eyebrows knitted together, and Frank began to understand where he was coming from even before Gerard opened his mouth to explain.

“When I say you look your age, I don’t mean it as an insult. You don’t look old, but you do look mature, and there’s a massive difference between these two. I can tell you’re a proper man – you’ve experienced life, and you don’t have the naivety of a twenty-year-old anymore. The same goes for me, I guess. I had fun being a stripper back in the day, but I’m all grown up now. I wouldn’t have fun undressing before the crowd, not the way I did when I was in my twenties, at least. By doing what I’m doing and being perceived as someone older, I can still derive some happiness from my job.”

“Do you?” Frank asked quickly. “Derive happiness from it?”

“Most of the time,” Gerard agreed. “Like any other job, there are better and worse days, but even on the worst ones, I still don’t *hate* it.”

“You couldn’t do a nine to five could you?”

“Fuck no,” Gerard laughed, leaning back in his chair.

Frank could understand that much. Journalism was maybe not as free of an occupation as Gerard’s passion, especially not in the beginning, but after working in the field for years, Frank was mostly left to his own devices. He picked his topics, he picked his interviews, and unless he *wanted* to write something, no one was pressuring him to deliver a new piece for the paper. He was supposed to be in the office on Fridays to catch up with the editors, but if he wanted to, he could have left directly after the meeting, and no one would have stopped him. He hadn’t entirely realized before just how good he had it until then.

“So you tease people for a living.”

“I hope I do. Is it working?”

If only he knew how effectively.

“It’s working,” Frank couldn’t help but smile back at him. Gerard knew he was good, there was no denying it, so it came as a surprise when his cheeks reddened upon hearing Frank’s confirmation. “Oh, come on, you know you’re great at it.”

“It’s not really about my skills, though. In this industry, if you don’t have the looks, you don’t have the income. Sad as it is, you’d have to be a genius performer to keep an audience without looking pretty.”

“But you are pretty,” Frank said immediately, and the blush seemed to spread from Gerard’s skin onto his own. “And you are also talented. No wonder you made it.”

“Flattered.”

It was Frank’s time to bite his thumb, worrying it between his teeth. He didn’t have more questions for Gerard – not ones he had planned, at least, and he thought Travis would probably have enough to fit him in with the rest of his queer artist pack that he had collected, but that didn’t mean he wanted to leave. Despite coming off as stand-offish and extravagant on stage, Gerard was surprisingly easy to talk to once Frank figured out how to crack his shell open, and he wanted to know more. There was a story there, he was sure of it; some mysteries Gerard would probably be willing to share, given enough time, and Frank was really, *really* curious about them.

It was not his place or time to ask, however, so he closed his notebook with an audible thud and sent Gerard what he hoped was an encouraging smile. Gerard’s shoulders visibly relaxed, and his head fell back as he stretched. He should be leaving, Frank told himself as he gathered his stuff and hid it in his bag, but something made him stop.

“Do you really never do it anymore?” he asked just as Gerard stood up to lead him to the door. He got a questioning look in return. “The typical striptease, as you called it. Never-ever?”

“Never-ever,” Gerard nodded.

“Aren’t you curious if you still could, though? I mean, I take daily news offers every now and then just to see if I am still capable of writing a piece in under a couple of hours. It’s not my thing anymore, but sometimes it’s fun to go back to the roots, you know?”

He didn’t like how Gerard gazed back at him as if Frank’s words were a challenge of sorts.

“I guess I could,” he said slowly. “If I found the right audience.”

Frank knew what it was, but he refused to play along. He looked his age, but he felt his age, too. The days of harmless flirting were long gone, and the only teasing he could handle – barely, too – was Gerard performing on stage the way he did nowadays. He sent him an encouraging smile nonetheless because he wasn’t about crushing someone’s spirit, especially someone he found interesting. Still, he didn’t dwell on the handshake they exchanged and didn’t lean into him when Gerard inched closer.

“I hope you find it,” he said, pulling his hand back from between Gerard’s fingers. “Thank you for talking to me. It was a pleasure to meet you, Gerard.”

The disappointment in Gerard’s eyes was fleeting and gone straight away.

“Likewise, Frank,” he nodded and ushered Frank out of the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

*

Frank could feel Travis staring at him.

He had been doing it for a better part of fifteen minutes, slurping loudly every time he lifted his can of Coke and gazing at Frank like he had never seen him before. It was sort of the same look he had kept on giving him right after he had learned Frank was a homosexual, but there was a spark in his eyes now that hadn't been there before. It was driving Frank up the goddamn wall, but he had told himself he wasn't going to react until Travis grew a pair and told him straight on what was on his mind. He kept stubbornly staring at the screen of his laptop. The photo of Gerard had been a nightmare to edit, mainly because Frank would have preferred to leave it as was – imperfect but beautiful at the same time – and no matter what he did, he couldn't quite find a good place for it in between the text he had written.

If Travis weren't being a freak, Frank would be inclined to dump it on him and go home.

"You know," Travis said after a moment, taking another loud sip of his soda. "I have a lot of material for this article. Like, a proper shitload of stuff. It wouldn't be the end of the world if I didn't include this bit."

Frank told himself to breathe – in and out, three times – before he pushed himself away from the desk and gazed up at him.

"Something not up to your standards here?"

"Oh, no, it's great," Travis shrugged with a smirk. "And I know you think so, too."

"Of course I do, it's my fucking work," Frank frowned at him. "What's up with you, dude? You sent me there to collect all that, and now you don't want it?"

"I want it," Travis admitted without any shame. "I'm just not sure if you wanna give it to me."

"Huh?"

"You're drooling, my friend."

Frank was so far gone that he actually checked if he was (he wasn't). Travis laughed at him, rolling his eyes, and Frank had to tell himself blowing up in the office was not the best idea. He was not going to punch Travis in the face, not that day at least, but he was fuming by the time he promptly shut his laptop screen and turned to face him fully. He could have said about a million things in response to it, but he settled on the easiest.

"Fuck off."

"Okay, listen. You're obviously impressed with this guy," Travis pointed his finger at Frank's sleeping laptop. "If you think there's nothing more to discover there, then it's cool, and we can find a place for it in my article. But I know that look in your eyes when you think you've stumbled upon a great story, and that's how you've been looking at this guy's photo for the past hour."

"Gerard."

"Huh?"

"His name is Gerard."

“Of course it is,” Travis clicked his tongue, leaning back in his chair again and pressing his hands together. “So, is there more to Gerard than these few pages you’ve scribbled?”

Frank knew there was. He had been thinking about it non-stop ever since he’d left *House* the previous week, to the point of googling the club’s website and trying to find out more about him. There wasn’t much there – just a photo not even showing Gerard’s face but his legs, instead, and his name attached to it, informing anyone concerned that Gerard would be returning to stage each Friday with a new song or a reminiscence of an old performance. That was the least exciting part of him, however. Frank wanted to dig deeper. The reasons Gerard had given him for quitting striptease and becoming a singing performer were clouded in mystery, and Frank had this annoying, gnawing feeling in his stomach that he was missing some critical clues as to how he had ended up where he was. Anyone who had been in the same industry for over twenty years was worth interviewing, Frank thought, and especially the industry as rough and unforgiving as strip clubs.

Gerard was simply captivating. The contrast between the confident, smirking stage persona and a soft, chuckling *Gerard* was so drastic Frank couldn’t wrap his head around it. He didn’t think either of them was made up, either; there was just something about being on stage that gave Gerard a rush of perkiness, and Frank wanted to find out what it was.

He might be crazily attracted to Gerard, too, but he tried not to dwell on that too long. It was all conflicting emotions, anyway. Even then, when the adrenaline of watching the show and interviewing him had subsided, Frank still couldn’t decide where he stood with him. A part of him would have loved to make Gerard’s thighs tremble, and another part was ready to bring him coffee and wrap him in a blanket. It was messing with his head like no other.

“Even if there is, I don’t know what you would like me to do about it,” Frank reached over for his well-used pen and pointed it at Travis. “We can’t both run similar articles.”

“We could.”

“No, we couldn’t,” Frank groaned. “You *know* Doug is not gonna allow that. He’s either gonna shoot me down or shoot you down, and I don’t see a point.”

Travis considered it for a moment. Frank didn’t particularly like how wide his eyes became when an idea struck him.

“No, buddy, that could totally work,” he rocked forward on his chair so hard that Frank was afraid the legs were going to break off, sending him onto the ground. “We can do a special edition extra. You could write Gerard’s biography, and we could include it in the issue along with my article. Like a detailed report of one of the artists’ lives.”

“A biography,” Frank said skeptically.

“Yes, let’s say… eighty to a hundred pages in your typical book format, starting with early life and then describing how he ended up in the business and eventually doing that,” Travis pointed at his laptop again. “I mean, wouldn’t you like to know?”

Frank would love to know; of course he would, but the question remained whether Gerard would be willing to share. He didn’t know what deal Travis had made with Brian regarding the interview and wasn’t eager to ask about details, but if Gerard was doing freelance, he would have no obligation to talk to Frank again. The fact that Frank had managed to score one conversation was already a win. That didn’t mean that he wasn’t interested in the possibility. If someone could promise Gerard would agree, Frank would be running down the street already. He had known the

good story was there when he had first spoken to Gerard, and he knew it in his office a week later, too. Although he hadn't seen what Frank had written, Travis apparently knew that too.

Or maybe it was just how Frank gazed at the screen lovingly; who knew? He always got like this, dreamy-eyed and distracted when he understood there was a topic he should approach, and this one wasn't different at all.

He wanted to interview Gerard again. Most of all, he wanted to *see* Gerard again.

"He may not be up for that," he pointed out to Travis, running a hand down his face. False hope was the worst, and Frank, although highly masochistic most of the time, was not about to get his heart broken over an unfinished story.

"Why? Did he look like he didn't want to talk to you last week?"

"No, he was nice," Frank grunted. "I don't know, man. This is a lot of recognition. You said it yourself, these people prefer to stay incognito if they can."

"But not Gerard."

Frank sighed deeply.

"Not Gerard, no."

"So? It's Friday. You could go today."

The idea terrified Frank more than excited him. He hated when things happened this way – suddenly and unpredictably, when he ended up thrown into a situation he didn't have time to prepare for. Which didn't mean in the slightest that it was a bad idea. His stomach flipped at the mere mention of going to *House* again, and his insides felt like they had liquified by the time he managed to put his pen down to prevent stabbing himself repeatedly in the eyes. He wanted to go; fuck, he really wanted to go.

He had never imagined Travis would have been helping him, either. He might have become more tolerant ever since he had become friends with Frank, and he hadn't been critical about the "lifestyle" as he had used to call it, but he had never been openly supportive, either. This, however, wasn't about the book. Travis had what he needed. The article part Frank had been tasked to work on was mostly finished, and as soon as he figured out where to put the photo, it would have been good to go. No, this seemed like Travis was going out of his way to help Frank hook up with a guy, and Frank would have been astonished by it if he wasn't vibrating with excited energy.

"I *could* go today," he repeated slowly. It was late already, but he had abandoned his ripped jeans for a new pair of slacks he had bought last weekend – and he wasn't going to comment on his reasons for buying them. The shirt maybe left a lot to be desired, but as he glanced lovingly Travis' way, he knew he had him there. "Alright, remember all that Starbucks coffee you didn't buy me for going out of my way to help you out?" Travis nodded, squinting his eyes. "Forget the coffee. I need your shirt."

Travis shot a quick look at Frank's worn-out, red t-shirt.

"Fine," he agreed. "But when you marry him, I wanna be your best man."

Frank was not going to marry anyone, he thought bitterly, but that didn't seem to matter. What mattered was focusing on convincing Gerard to open up and tell him his life story. He watched how Travis loosened his tie and smiled when he caught it in the air a few seconds later.

“If this story works out, you can be whatever the fuck you want.”

“Even the priest?”

Frank smiled wider, hooking the tie around his neck. “Even the priest.”

*

It was a different song that Friday. It reminded Frank of the melody seeping from his mother’s radio on lazy Sunday mornings during his childhood. Not exactly The Beatles’ song but something similar, a cheap knock-off created by some American band trying to ride the fame of the Brits. It was agonizingly slow, the upbeat bass from the previous week gone entirely, replaced – instead – with the soft plucking of a guitar and the mellow notes of strings. If someone had asked Frank a few hours prior if anyone could undress to this song and make it erotic, Frank would have laughed and said it was impossible. He was being proven very, very wrong.

He didn’t know if Gerard had spotted him yet or not. He chose a place further away from the stage this time, leaning against the bar in the vain hope he would be able to catch Gerard later on his way to his changing room, and surprisingly, it gave him possibly a better view of the performance than he would have had if he was right in front of him. The whiskey Frank was sipping burned his throat as he watched him.

The outfit was different that night, too. The flimsy shirt and black skirt were replaced with a trench coat, his high-heeled boots still present, and the only regret Frank had was not being able to see Gerard’s brown hair from beneath the scarf he had tied around his head. He looked elegant like that – like a proper lady, Frank’s mind supplied – but no less sexy than before. The sway of his hips hadn’t changed, and neither had the miles and miles of his naked legs as he trotted around the stage. It was almost as if he was a regular singer for a good portion of the song, and Frank let himself be lulled by the illusion, snapping a few photos with the flash off to avoid attracting attention.

When the trench coat parted, revealing a dark dress beneath it, Frank realized he was being stupid. It wasn’t an innocent performance. It was exactly what people, Frank included, had signed up for. The dress hugged Gerard’s body perfectly, emphasizing the clearly male form beneath it and stripping the pretense away. The waistline was almost non-existent, and the dress creased a little over his chest where the breasts would normally be. Still, when Gerard moved around and sang the sweet words about summer love in the sixties, Frank’s mouth filled with an excess of saliva, and the whiskey glass became slippery in his sweating hands. The previous week’s lust to bite and nibble at Gerard’s skin had given way to a low humming of desire, and Frank imagined different scenarios, watching the playful, cheeky smile spread on Gerard’s face.

He imagined how his pale body would look in the first rays of sunshine in the morning, stretched on top of the bed, and how he would blink lazily and hum in pleasure were Frank to kiss his collarbones. How he would yawn and arch into the touch, and how his hair would be messy and chaotic after a night of sleep. How these smooth, hairless legs would slide over the white sheets and how cold the skin would be, pressed against Frank’s tattooed, warmer one. Frank imagined how he’d stretch after getting up, how he’d cover the smile with a bite to his lip upon seeing the cup of coffee Frank would make for him, and how divine he would be, standing in front of their shared New York apartment windows on the 25th floor of some skyscraper, naked and beautiful and not ashamed at all.

Where the previous week's performance had made Frank think about late-night fluster, the one he was seeing now made him think of the mornings after. It was hard to choose which one was worse.

Gerard's performance ended with his dress hiked high up his thighs and a scarf unfurling from around his head. Frank couldn't help but notice how he didn't throw it at the crowd this time, and a small smile spread on his face. He didn't want to think he was special in any way, but the jealousy he was worried about never showed up. Especially when the lights went out, basking the room in darkness, and Gerard became only a shadow scurrying his way. Frank almost thought he would miss him and walk right past him and was prepared to reach a hand and stop him. Gerard was an attentive performer, though, and even in the dim gloom of the club, his eyes settled on Frank when he was walking past him.

He didn't smile, but then again, he didn't have to. He cocked his head instead, eyes widening a little as Frank leaned more firmly against the bar and saluted him with a glass. Frank wasn't sure if he wasn't imagining how he crooked his finger at him, beckoning him to follow, but he was not one to question opportunities when presented with them.

The dressing room lights were still anticlimactic and, just as previously, did nothing to diminish Gerard's beauty. When Frank shut the door behind him and turned around, Gerard was already looking at him.

"Didn't expect you to come back," his voice carried through a tiny space as he hiked his sunglasses higher up his sweaty hair. "Something wrong with the interview?"

"Quite the opposite. It turned out great," Frank nodded solemnly, forcing his eyes to remain on Gerard's face instead of sliding down to his uncovered skin and the hipbones he could see beneath the fabric of the dress. "That's actually why I'm here."

"Oh?"

"You make for an interesting story, Gerard."

"Exploiting the lives of poor performers?" Gerard scoffed, but there was no real bite to his words.

"I prefer to say I offer a chance for the poor performers' voices to be heard. And I would like to hear yours."

Gerard regarded him slowly. For the longest moment, he stayed quiet. Frank busied himself with watching his after-show routine – the glasses came off, put carefully on the vanity table, the trench coat got hung on the back of the chair, the scarf ended up on top of it. Frank's breath nearly hitched in his throat when he gripped the hem of the dress, but Gerard schooled himself quickly, remembering he had an unwanted audience in there with him. He did kick off his shoes, though, which brought the height difference between them a couple of inches down, and he didn't spare Frank a look as he padded, barefoot, behind the curtain.

"Alright," Frank heard him say after a moment. "Lay it on me – why am I talking to you again instead of Travis? Is the article in your hands now?"

"It became a collaborative work, but the article part still belongs to Travis."

"What's your part?"

"You."

Even to Frank's ears, it sounded like an invitation and not of the journalist sort. Gerard's head

peeked from behind the curtain, eyebrows high on his forehead. Frank glued his eyes to a few inches of bare shoulder skin he could see along with it. Gerard looked equally surprised and amused when he caught him staring. “You may want to elaborate before I get the wrong idea.”

“Travis suggested we could do a special edition. He wants to run his article, but he interviewed a lot of people already, and he wouldn’t be able to include more than a small chunk of your story,” Frank explained calmly. “A few paragraphs, at most.”

“And?”

“And I think you deserve more than that.”

Silence stretched longer this time. When Gerard pulled the curtain open again, he was in his customary after-show attire, the sweatpants loose around his legs and a long-sleeved t-shirt hiding most of his skin. His feet were still bare, and Frank followed him with his eyes when Gerard lowered himself onto a chair to put his socks on. He didn’t seem offended by his comment, at least not yet, but there was no excitement Frank was hoping to see, either. He looked deep in thought, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. Frank sighed deeply, pushing away from the door.

“Do you disagree?” he asked, coming over to lean against the vanity table next to Gerard. He counted it as a success when Gerard didn’t recoil.

“Not necessarily,” Gerard shook his head. “I just don’t know if there is a story here that you would be interested in.”

“I know there is.”

“You don’t know a single thing about me, Frank.”

“I would like to, though.”

Gerard rolled his eyes at the cliché line, making Frank smile. He shrugged, spreading his arms to the sides to let Gerard know he didn’t know what the hell he was doing, either, and held the intense gaze as it slid over his face. He couldn’t be wrong about it; he *knew* he wasn’t. Whether it was some sort of journalist instinct making him believe it or the sixth sense he didn’t know he possessed, he wasn’t sure, but just looking at the way Gerard squinted was enough to prove him right. He had a lot to say, that much was obvious. Frank knew he was getting somewhere when Gerard’s legs stretched in front of him, hands clasped together over his chest.

“Okay,” he nodded, looking up at Frank. “How would that work?”

“There isn’t much time left, so we’d have to work quickly. Travis’ article is supposed to come out in the next month’s issue, giving us a little over three weeks.”

“I don’t know if I have three weeks’ worth of material for you.”

“You do,” Frank said without hesitation. “But you have to make it in two. I’ll need time to edit it out and put it all together.”

“Put what together, exactly? What is this supposed to be?”

“A biography.”

Gerard laughed, making the wrinkles appear around his eyes. Frank would have joined him if he wasn’t so set on making it work, so instead, he settled on making his face as stern as possible to

show Gerard just how serious he was about the whole ordeal.

“No one will want to read my biography, Frank,” Gerard shook his head. “I appreciate the offer, but you’re going to waste your time with me.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Like I said—”

“Call it an instinct,” Frank interrupted. “Listen, you don’t have to agree to it. If you don’t want to do it, then say so, and I won’t be offended. I understand me digging into your personal life may not be the easiest thing to accept. But if you think you need to refuse because you don’t believe it’ll be a good story, then don’t. I know what I’m doing.”

When Gerard still didn’t give him an answer, Frank sighed deeply and fixed him with a severe look.

“Okay, how about this,” he began. “Let’s do one meeting, no obligations. You’ll get paid the same amount as if we signed a contract, and we’ll see what comes out of this one. If you like the progress, then we’ll draft an agreement and we can move on further with it. If you don’t like it, then no hard feelings, and Travis will just add a part about you in his article. Sounds good to you?”

“Reasonable,” Gerard agreed. “But I don’t want any payment.”

“It’s a normal procedure. You’re basically selling me the rights to your story.”

“Maybe, but still,” Gerard pointed with his finger. “At least not for that first meeting. If I decide to go through with it, we can go back to talking about the compensation.”

That was more than fair, in Frank’s opinion. He was hoping the idea of getting paid would convince Gerard to agree, but it didn’t come as a surprise that money wasn’t an essential factor for him. He had no idea how much the performers in *House* were paid, especially those who ignored the shiny pole in the middle of the stage and chose to tease the audience instead, but he could understand doing something purely out of passion. That was what he was aiming at, too, after all. His interest in Gerard’s story didn’t guarantee good sales. The magazine readers might be as uninterested in it as Gerard predicted, and it would leave Frank with little to no income for himself and, ultimately, Travis too. He could pay Travis back probably, but where would that leave him?

Not that it mattered in the long run. Whether the story would sell or not, Frank would end up with an interesting experience, and he could see no harm in spending more time with Gerard. He might not know a thing about him, as Gerard pointed out, but he could already say he would like him. He was a joy to be around, and his mysteriousness was getting under Frank’s skin. He needed to get under Gerard’s if he didn’t want to be forced to peel his own off.

He met Gerard's expectant gaze and smiled, extending his hand. “Deal.”

Gerard’s palm was warm where it grazed his fingers, and the grip was simultaneously gentle and firm. “Alright, mister journalist,” he smiled back at Frank. “Where do you want to start?”

“Are you free tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Then give me your number. I’ll text you the time and place.”

*

Gerard was already waiting for him when Frank pushed through the door of the café he had chosen a few minutes after the agreed time. It wasn't his fault – the traffic had been a true nightmare, despite it being Saturday, and he had spent a good portion of an hour biting at his nails in a taxi and praying for half of New York's population to just vanish into thin air along with their vehicles. He didn't want to be rude, and he was panting now, having run the last couple of blocks. The smell of fresh coffee and pastries made his stomach grumble when he stepped inside. For a second, he lost focus, dwelling on how he had omitted breakfast in the morning to work on the material he had already gathered from Gerard and how he was absolutely famished. He wondered how unmannerly it would be to get an apple pie along with his coffee while doing an interview and then threw his worries out the window when he spotted Gerard half hidden in the corner.

He hadn't noticed Frank just yet. He was idly playing with a fork in his hand, strangely fascinated by a piece of cake he had stabbed with it before, the dough rotating in the air as Gerard observed the colorful sprinkles etched in icing. He didn't seem uncomfortable by sitting and eating on his own in the slightest, unaware – or ignorant – of the looks some people kept throwing his way, and Frank could feel a beginning of a smile form on his face. He looked good, too. Not dressed in either a skirt or his sweatpants, he still looked like he had made an effort to look presentable, and Frank took advantage of Gerard's temporary fixation on the fork to rake his eyes up and down his body.

For a forty-five years old man, he certainly knew how to make skinny jeans work.

With his apple pie and a soy latte in hand, Frank pushed through the small crowd gathered by the counter and made his bee-line for Gerard. He had prepared questions for him, some loose conversational starters to warm him up and make him talk, but the way Gerard's head snapped back and his eyes widened in delight proved they would probably be unnecessary. Frank smiled back, his worries regarding whether or not Gerard really wanted to do it evaporating into thin air, and he slid into the booth across from him with a light heart and an empty mind.

"Hi, shit, sorry I'm late."

"Hi," Gerard's smile turned sweet. "Don't worry about it. I've lived here long enough to be more surprised by people being on time than people being late."

"You were on time."

"Oh, I wasn't," Gerard laughed. "The plan was to show up at nine, and I only reached here, like, quarter to ten. New York traffic, am I right?" he winked, leaning his elbows on the table and putting his chin in his palms.

"We said eleven."

"Mm, we did, but I would be useless if I didn't have at least two of these before you showed up," he pointed at his almost empty cup of coffee. "I'm not a morning person. Ups and downs of working nights for most of my life, I guess."

"This will take a while. You want another one?"

It was endearing how Gerard's gaze jumped between Frank's hands, currently curled around a tape

recorder and his coffee mug, as he tugged his hair behind his ear. “You don’t have to—”

“It’s a yes, then,” Frank nodded firmly, abandoning his equipment in favor of snatching the mug from before Gerard. “What’s your poison?”

“These were two flat whites,” Gerard shrugged. “And they were great, don’t get me wrong, but as it turns out, one *can* have too many flat whites, so… surprise me.”

Surprise him. Frank could do that.

He returned with a fresh mug full of white mocha, mostly because he believed Gerard would require a sugar rush if they were to go through this interview without anyone falling asleep. The café he picked was a tiny, quiet place and the weather outside did nothing to prevent Frank from feeling sleepy. The rain poured steadily from the skies, bound to be replaced by snow in a few days, and the grey clouds moved lazily above the city’s buildings. He realized he should have maybe asked about any allergies beforehand just as he placed the mug in front of Gerard again, but Gerard only pulled it closer and sniffed it, a pleased expression making its way onto his face.

“Hmm, mocha.”

“Good?”

“Good,” he confirmed with a nod. “Why, though?”

Because you’re sweet, Frank thought to himself. “I used to come here and get one every day when I was in grad school. Helped me get through all these bullshit classes.”

“Master’s or Ph.D.?”

“I’m not that smart,” Frank laughed. “Neither, really. I never finished my Master’s.”

“You are smart, though. Or extremely crazy, I haven’t decided yet.”

“What’s it going to take for you to make up your mind?”

“You either impressing or disappointing me today.”

Frank cocked his eyebrow and reached for his recorder again to do something with his hands. If he didn’t know better, he would think Gerard was flirting with him. Or maybe he really was, but that didn’t have to mean anything. Frank surely wasn’t going to jeopardize important work by developing unrequited feelings. It didn’t stop him from accepting the challenge, though.

“Making me work for it, I see,” he could feel the corner of his lips curling in an involuntary smile. “Alright, let me prove my worth to you then.”

Gerard smirked from behind his coffee mug.

“Shoot.”

“We need to establish a timeline for this thing to work,” he explained slowly, pulling a pen out of his bag and flipping his notebook open. “I was thinking roughly around sixty thousand words, give or take, but it all depends on how we can divide your life into parts. We’re focusing mostly on your professional career, though, so we can skim over the childhood part and give it maybe five to seven thousand.”

“What would be considered childhood?” Gerard interjected. “Is high school still childhood, or is it

a later period?"

"Why?"

"The article Travis is running is about gay artists, right?" Frank nodded in confirmation. "Well," Gerard's smile was almost shy. "I guess I should deliver my coming out story then, and that would be high school."

"Was it groundbreaking?"

"Not as much as you think, probably. It was mostly an accident."

"Okay, tell me later," Frank lifted his pen in the air to stop Gerard mid-story. "We'll see how long the childhood part is then, but we still need to have some sort of plan. If it was up to you, how would you divide it?"

"The number of parts doesn't matter?"

"No, just go for it."

Gerard put his mug down and gestured to Frank's notebook with his hand. Frank slid it over, putting the pen on top of it, and watched with interest how Gerard squinted as he focused. He couldn't read what he was scribbling upside down and dug into his apple pie in the meantime. It was an exceptionally good apple pie.

Gerard frowned a couple of times, the pen moving frantically over the paper as he crossed something out and added a comment on the side, and then he leaned back and admired his work. He seemed satisfied with it as he hummed and pushed it back to Frank. "What do you think?"

Pulling the notebook closer, Frank skimmed over the titles. There were seven of them, written in Gerard's messy, cursive handwriting: *childhood and coming out story, art school, the beginning, Bert, ~~grief~~ heartbreak, new perspectives, new beginnings.* Questions accumulated in Frank's mind immediately, his stomach tightening with the need to discover everything at once, and he had to physically stop himself from showering Gerard with queries. Some parts he understood instantly, and some only made him raise his eyebrows higher. He took a deep breath and made a mental note to go slow.

"I'm intrigued," he admitted truthfully and then laughed, shaking his head at himself. "I kind of want to ask you about a million questions now. You sure know how to keep things suspensive."

"I tease for a living, you said it yourself."

"You're fucking good at it, too."

Gerard snorted and hugged his coffee mug to his chest.

"So?" he gestured with his head. "Shall we begin?"

Frank nodded, having a strange feeling that he was walking into a lion's den. "Let's. Tell me about your childhood."

*

Gerard hadn't lied about his age when he had first told Frank he was forty-five. Born in 1977, just across the river from New York, he had spent his childhood the way Frank would expect the boys his age to do. Similar, even, to how Frank had spent his, only with a little less sneaking out to go to punk rock shows and a little more drawing in the basement his room had been located in.

"That sounds depressing," Frank noted as he watched Gerard make use of his notebook again, sketching from memory how the furniture had been situated in his room. "And looks depressing, too," he pointed at the paper. "You only had one small window down there?"

"I did. Huh," Gerard hummed in surprise. "I guess that explains a lot."

"You can tell me to fuck off, but did you struggle with it?"

"Mental health?" Gerard eyed him questioningly. Frank nodded, nibbling on his thumb. He didn't know how personal he wanted to get with Gerard. In any other case, he would have been drilling his subject for intimate details, but Gerard looked almost too delicate and fragile to be bombarded with these. "For years, yeah. It wasn't pretty."

"Depression?"

"And multiple addictions. I'll get to these," Gerard winced, his hand halting for a second before resuming the drawing. "But depression, yeah, there was a lot of that in the early days. I don't really know when it started, but I guess it has been there for most of my life. I remember having dark thoughts as early as late elementary school."

Frank gestured with his hand, and Gerard flipped the notebook to the last page, tearing it out and handing it over. He rummaged through his bag for a moment in search of another pen since Gerard had stolen his lucky one, then lifted his gaze to his face again. "Not anymore, though?"

"Not actively," Gerard agreed slowly. "You know, there are always some better days and some worse days, and I occasionally will fall into a depressive episode, but all in all, I would say I'm doing much better now."

Frank wrote it down quickly.

"Glad to hear that," he commented, finding out it was more honest than he had anticipated. Gerard sent him a small smile of gratitude. "Was drawing something that helped you deal with it?"

"I think so. Drawing and dancing were the only activities I felt like doing most of the time back then. They both allowed me to stay inside my room, and I didn't have to face people."

"Dancing?"

"Oh yeah," Gerard chuckled, hand coming to cover his mouth as he laughed. "I wasn't good at it, mind you. I was actually kind of terrible."

"I don't believe you. I've seen you on stage, Gerard, you're not fooling anyone."

"Oh, there are years of learning how to control my body to make it move the way it does now. In elementary and middle school, I was this awkward, chubby kid who couldn't move his limbs the way he wanted. I had trouble walking down the street without stumbling over my own feet. Dancing was definitely not one of my strongest suits."

"And yet it became your whole life," Frank pointed out. "Did you see it coming, back then? Did you think being on stage was going to be your destiny?"

“No, definitely not. I wanted to be an artist,” Gerard sighed, a note of nostalgia showing in his tone. From what Frank saw slowly taking form in his notebook, Gerard had had a good reason to think it was a way to go. He was fantastic at it. “If I knew how much shit I’d get for it in high school, maybe I would have reconsidered.”

“You don’t strike me as a guy who could voluntarily be a football player instead.”

“Oh, no, I would have broken all of my bones,” Gerard laughed harder at that. “I hate sports. Sorry, but I do. They’re so pointless.”

“All of them?”

“Hockey is fine, I guess,” Gerard hummed, making Frank frown. From all the things he could think of, hockey would not be the one he imagined Gerard digging. “Oh! And I’m an excellent volleyball server.”

“You played in high school?”

“Was forced to, unfortunately. Believe me, I tried switching PE for more art classes, but they wouldn’t let me. Something about caring for the youth’s physical health, as if the food in the cafeteria wasn’t a given heart attack.”

Frank agreed with that. He had already established he and Gerard had not attended the same school and decided to stay quiet about the fact that they had practically been neighbors back in the day, but he assumed all school cafeterias had fed children the same shit. It must have been as hard on Gerard, who had admitted to watching his weight a little in these times, as it had been on Frank, who had been trying to refrain from eating meat even then. New Jersey had really been a shithole.

“You said *more* art classes,” Frank prompted. “It means you took some of them.”

“Anything I could get my hands on. Drawing, painting, sculpture, film production. I was even in a choir for a while.”

“Why for a while?”

“Oh, you’re good,” Gerard smirked, leaning back in his chair. The basement drawing was apparently finished as he pushed the notebook closer to Frank to let him take a look. As much as Frank appreciated the craft, he was more interested in how Gerard clearly remembered something important. “I took it up in 11th grade after I got bored with film production, but I was forced to run away from there at the end of the year. I didn’t pick it up again in 12th grade.”

“There is something you’re not telling me.”

“As I said – you’re good,” Gerard licked his lips slowly. “How should I do this? Can I change someone’s name, like a teacher’s, for example, to protect their identity?”

“If you deem it necessary,” Frank shrugged. “But it’s Belleville you’re talking about. I don’t think people will have trouble finding out who taught in Belleville high.”

For a moment, Gerard looked almost pained.

“Okay, I’ll tell you, but I don’t know if we can use it,” he warned. “This might incriminate someone, and I would rather not be forced to meet with them again, especially not in court.”

An uneasy feeling swam through Frank’s stomach as he nodded slowly. He leaned over and put

down the words in his notebook – CONFIDENTIAL. That seemed to satisfy Gerard for the time being, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. The amount of trust Gerard was putting in him was astounding, and Frank promised himself he would be very careful with each and every piece of information Gerard was going to provide. He couldn't let him down.

"Pick a name," Gerard asked quietly. "This way, I won't make any subconscious associations," he explained when Frank's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Alright. Anthony."

"Why Anthony?"

"It's my middle name."

"Bad choice then," Gerard was still smiling, but there was a sadness about it now, his gaze unfocused as he flung the remaining of his coffee in the mug. "You wanted to know when I realized I wasn't straight. Well, that would be the choir lessons in high school," he closed his eyes for a moment, recalling the images known only to him. "Anthony was everything I wanted to be. Confident, funny, outgoing. He was a literal ray of sunshine. Not once in my life have I seen him without a smile on his face. Everyone, without exception, loved him to death, and so did I. The difference between everyone and me, however, was that he made it abundantly clear that he liked me back."

Frank cocked his eyebrow. "Made it clear how?"

"It was early in the school year, couldn't be later than October. Definitely before Halloween, because I remember spending it at his place," Gerard rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We stayed behind after the choir class ended. I don't know why – maybe I was asked to help pick up the pulpits or just wanted to spend more time with him. My point is, it was Autumn. The days were short, and by the time the 4 PM choir class ended, the school building was already dark and deserted. Quite a romantic setting if you ask me."

"What happened then?"

"You know, the usual. Not-so-accidental colliding of bodies in the tight space of the classroom that turned into a kiss which then turned into making out against the grand piano. Or on top of it, really," Gerard giggled at the memory. "And listen, I might have been sixteen then, but I have never kissed anyone before, so it was a life-changing experience. Quite literally," he pointed at himself, making Frank force a smile. "Anthony wasn't shy about it, either, and I liked the attention. For a closed-off kid without any friends but my younger brother, it felt fucking amazing to feel wanted."

"Weren't you afraid of some teacher catching you?"

"Anthony made sure to lock the door," Gerard said slowly. "And he *was* the teacher."

"You—" Frank's voice wavered. "You said you were sixteen," Gerard nodded, his gaze becoming more intense again. He already knew where Frank was going with it. "How old was he?"

"Thirty-five."

"Oh, wow."

"See? That's what I mean when I say some things need to stay between you and me."

“But… why did you agree to it?” Frank couldn’t understand that. Sure, he had had a fair share of hot teachers throughout the years, and he had daydreamed about some of them, but not once in his life had he considered actually starting an affair with any of them. Not even in college when it wouldn’t have been illegal.

“Frank,” Gerard chuckled. “He was *really* hot.”

“I… okay,” he waved his hand. “Just continue.”

Gerard smiled wider, generously deciding not to comment on how flustered Frank had suddenly become. “I knew it wasn’t the smartest thing to do,” he continued after a moment. “But he was nice to me. As I said, I was a freak kid with no friends, and Anthony provided more than just friendship. He provided safety, mostly, because I knew he would have my back if someone went after me. He protected me from bullies and has stepped in more than once to stop someone from punching me in the face.”

“Teachers should do that anyway,” Frank pointed out grimly. “Without any side advantages.”

“You’re missing the point here – I liked the side advantages. I felt safe going to school again, and the sex was great, too.”

“You can’t be serious,” Frank’s eyes widened even more. “He had sex with you?”

“Of course he did. What did you think, that we only kissed by the grand piano like a bunch of teenagers in love? We weren’t in love… or, well, he wasn’t in love with me at least, but he sure as hell knew how to fuck me to make me believe he was.”

Frank’s hand trembled slightly when he reached over and pressed the pause button on the recorder. Gerard’s mouth shut firmly at that, a shadow of worry crossing his face. Frank didn’t want him to worry – none of this material would ever see the light of day, simply because Frank could not write it in the book without simultaneously reporting the case to the police, and he didn’t think Gerard would appreciate it if he did. Not that he didn’t want to; no, every ounce of him screamed to pull the phone up and call the authorities. Nonetheless, if he didn’t do it, then Doug would make him anyway. Frank wasn’t sure if he shouldn’t be scrapping the tape in general.

“Shocked you?” Gerard smiled sweetly again.

“These are serious accusations, Gerard,” Frank managed to get out. “If we publish it, we will be required to take legal actions against it.”

“He doesn’t teach anymore, and the age of consent is sixteen, you know.”

“It’s eighteen when it’s a teacher or a coach.”

“Is it?” Gerard’s eyebrows flew up. “Oh, in that case…”

“I can’t publish that part of the story,” Frank repeated firmly. “Or, well, I can, but I need you to understand that a police investigation will follow it.”

“This is the main reason why our community doesn’t want to do interviews with you people,” Gerard pointed the finger at him. Frank was about to be very offended, but Gerard’s face didn’t match his words and was morose, instead, when he sighed heavily. “But I understand, I do. We can diminish it and say I had a crush on a teacher. Would that work?”

“For the story? Yes. For my moral obligations? Not so much.”

“Frank…”

“I know, I know,” Frank waved his hand. “None of my business, I get it. Sorry.”

“I know what the law says, but you need to understand that I was conscious of what I was doing. I knew it then, and I know it now. Legally it doesn’t mean shit, but it was a long time ago, Frank, and I don’t wanna open the closet and let the skeletons out.”

This was going against everything Frank believed in, but the longer Gerard stared at him, the more Frank realized he would eventually relent. The first few years of Gerard’s life had already proven there would be more controversial, dark situations happening, and if Frank wanted to write this biography, he would have to bite his tongue and sit through it quietly. He forced the last piece of apple pie down his throat, ignoring how bitter it tasted, and pressed the play button again.

Gerard exhaled loudly.

“It didn’t last long,” he continued unphased. “A couple of months at most, and then Anthony broke it off. I was severely heartbroken, as you can imagine, and was forced to quit the choir classes. I couldn’t stand looking at him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Gerard waved him off. “It was a long time ago, but hey – there’s your coming out story. Unsurprisingly, I wasn’t interested in music for a while after that, so when I was forced to choose a career path, I did the dumbest thing I could have done – I went to art school.”

It was Gerard this time who leaned over the table and gently stopped the recording. Frank was so surprised he nearly turned it back on. It wasn’t enough; he needed to know more. He wanted to hear all about art school and everything that followed and he was fully aware that he was pouting when Gerard laughed at him and leaned back.

“Okay,” he sighed, stretching slightly and closing his notebook. The basement drawing was safely inside, and Frank promised himself he would scan it the second he got back home. “Wow, that was a wild ride.”

“We’re only just beginning.”

“Are we?” Frank felt adrenaline pulsing through his veins again. “Should I understand you would wish to continue?”

“Mm, if you feel up for it,” Gerard nodded slowly. “You’re easy to talk to, Frank, and you ask the right questions. This is fun,” he gestured around them nonchalantly. “But my story isn’t about love and sunshine. What you’ve heard about Anthony is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?” Gerard looked almost concerned.

“Positive.”

Frank was more than positive. He was so absolutely pumped to learn more about Gerard he didn’t even know where to begin to explain it. He would need to go out of his way and thank Travis for extending this opportunity to him.

“You said we have two weeks. I’m supposed to be at *House* again tomorrow evening, but we could

do Monday if that's alright with you," Gerard offered. "Or you can come to the club and talk after I'm done with the show."

"I thought you only performed on Fridays?"

"Oh, I wouldn't survive with one show a week. My solo performances are on Fridays, but I do several every week, mostly collaborations," he explained. When he stood up, Frank's gaze followed the movement on his hand as he gathered the mug and downed what little coffee had accumulated on the bottom of it.

"I can't get the contract draft ready by tomorrow. I'll have it on Monday, though."

"Fair," Gerard nodded. "But the invitation still stands if you want to have some fun. Here," he reached into his pocket, and Frank was presented with a laminated piece of paper. He read the letters on it and couldn't help but laugh. "In case you would like to show up after all."

Frank Iero, assistant of G. Way, was printed neatly on the paper, Gerard's signature curling at the bottom of the page.

"Assistant, huh?"

"It was the least offensive title I could come up with," Gerard grinned at him. The knot in Frank's stomach tightened slightly at the warmth of his eyes. "So – should I say see you tomorrow or see you Monday?"

Frank had plans for tomorrow evening. Plans involving his TV that had been abandoned for the past couple of days and the popcorn that would be reaching its expiration date if Frank didn't open it soon. There was a football match happening on a Sunday, and it was one of his favorite teams playing, and he really, really wanted to watch it so he could bitch about it with Travis later. He had even gone as far as considering inviting Travis and his wife over so he could spend some time properly socializing. His fingers played with his new business card for a moment, rotating it on top of the café table before the corners of his mouth raised in a smile.

He stood up and extended his hand again. Gerard grasped it gently, his long fingers curling around Frank's wrist.

"Thanks for today," Frank said. "And see you tomorrow."

Gerard didn't respond, but he was still smiling when he left the café and disappeared around the corner.

*

The collaborative performance was much better than Frank had expected. When he showed up at *House* the next day, he was distrustful of the entire ordeal. Sure, he knew he liked Gerard's performances – loved them, in fact, with how fresh they were and how out of the ordinary compared to what anyone could expect, but there was no saying if he would feel the same about a show with more people in it. He had been worried mostly about how Gerard was going to cope. Doing your own thing, coming up with ideas, and executing them to the best of your abilities was one thing, but following someone's lead was something completely different. There was trust involved, and based on what Frank had heard so far from Gerard's story, he wouldn't have been surprised if he found out Gerard didn't have much of it to give. A part of him had been screaming at him about another aspect, too. If the performance was a group effort, was there more nudity to

be expected? Was Frank going to see things he got used to not seeing?

But it wasn't anything like that. It turned out to be suggestive, of course, but that was to be expected. There was a lot of spandex involved, and although it was a far cry from the classy, chic outfits Gerard had pulled off in his solo shows, Frank would have been a gross liar if he said he didn't enjoy it. He nearly hadn't spotted Gerard at first when a mass of bodies showed up on stage, all but the guy with a guitar dressed in tight, black suits, but it didn't take long. Frank was actively looking for him, and Gerard stood out like a sore thumb.

He had more grace about him than the rest of them, or Frank was just biased. Despite not being the youngest of them, Gerard had a stage presence that was miles higher than whatever the youngsters – a couple of them, Frank didn't even count – were trying to do. A dark track was playing, accompanied by the guitar strings, and Gerard looked like he was exactly where he had always been supposed to be. Words left Frank again, making him shake his head. He was a good journalist; it was just hard to find a way to describe something as fluid and as captivating as Gerard.

He began to wonder why Gerard had made him a business card as he strolled past the bar after the song ended and was greeted with a courteous nod from the security guy. He wasn't asked any questions, his bag wasn't searched, and he was let through as if he was a part of the club himself.

It brought a smile to his face. It was rewarding to be considered a part of the team now, even if only as Gerard's assistant.

Then, as soon as Frank pushed the dressing room door open, it wasn't rewarding anymore. It felt like a slap to his face almost, although he should have maybe seen it coming. He froze, his hand still wrapped around the handle, and considered briefly how strange it would be if he turned around and ran away. He had been spotted already, however, and Gerard's face brightened. There was no escaping from this.

"Frank! Hi!"

As politely as he could, Frank pushed his way past the two naked guys casually discussing the performance right next to the door. One of them was leaning against the wall, gesturing wildly and nearly getting Frank in the face with one of his hands, while the other's head was thrown back as he laughed. It wasn't an exaggeration to call them nude, either. Not even a lone sock had stayed on their bodies, just miles and miles of skin – one of them, the one next to the door, giving Frank a run for his money with the number of tattoos he had – and they only looked his way when Frank pushed the door shut.

"Hi honey," one of them said when Frank, clearly losing his mind, made eye contact with him. "Like what you're seeing here?"

The thing was – Frank *did* like what he was seeing. The guy was undoubtedly handsome, maybe more muscular than what Frank was usually attracted to, but also clearly interested in him. His eyebrows had risen high onto his forehead in an invitation that was impossible to mistake. What little Frank knew about body language yelled and screamed at him that he could go home with this man tonight and he wouldn't regret it. He swallowed hard, lamenting leaving his glasses at home so he could hide behind them, and allowed his eyes to rake up and down the guy's naked body. He wasn't subtle about it, either, and it felt like a kick to his guts when he realized what he was doing. It had been way too long since the last time Frank had hooked up with someone, and something told him he wouldn't need a lot of experience to have fun tonight.

"Frank!"

His head snapped up as he jumped a little, caught red-handed. Gerard was smirking when Frank caught his gaze from across the room. He must have been perfectly aware of Frank's little moment of weakness, amusement playing in his eyes as he beckoned him to come closer. Unlike the rest of the men walking around the dressing room, he was wearing his usual sweatpants and a loose t-shirt. Frank thought briefly how fucking unfair that was.

"Sorry," he shrugged, shooting a sideways look at the naked man. "Duty calls."

"Not fucking fair, Gee," the guy groaned, pointing the finger at Gerard. "You're going to ruin it for us all."

"Grow a pair, Jake, and work on your pickup lines, then maybe I won't have to," Gerard grinned at him. Frank felt his insides liquefy when Gerard threw an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer. He reminded himself it was still the stage Gerard, not every day, shy Gerard he was only beginning to discover. This Gerard was filled with adrenaline, he was cocky, and he was possessive. Frank rolled his eyes at the immature banter. *Men.* The hold around his shoulders tightened slightly, and a hot puff of breath tickled his ear. "Hi, Frankie."

Frank sighed. He wasn't going to spoil Gerard's fun. Turning his head, he found himself a little too close to the intense gaze of the hazel eyes and had to swallow hard before he smiled. "Hi, *Gee."*

"You're ready to get out of here?"

Apparently, Frank was not going home with Jake that evening after all. When Gerard's hand slipped to his elbow to grab it, he couldn't even feel bad about it.

"Whenever you are."

Gerard threw him an amused gaze and winked, fingers sliding down to curl around his middle. Some assistant, Frank thought briefly as he played along and leaned heavily into him, Gerard's body warmth radiating onto him. God, he was so hot. There was still a layer of sweat glistening on his skin from where its been stewing underneath the spandex just a few minutes before, and his breathing was elevated as if he still hadn't completely calmed down after the show. He didn't act tired, though. A jacket was flung effortlessly over his shoulder, and Frank had to consciously focus on adjusting his pace to his when Gerard led them toward the exit. He managed to keep a straight face up until the moment when Gerard smiled wider and blew Jake a kiss.

"Oh fuck off," Jake grunted, flipping him off. Frank found himself laughing and twisting his neck to look at him as Gerard ushered him out the door.

"You're very good-looking!" he yelled. He only caught the beginning of Jake's grin before the door shut, and he was being pulled down the narrow corridor and then outside the club completely, Gerard's hold on his hip still firm. He only let him go when they stepped outside into the cold, early December air, and he needed to put his jacket on. Frank watched him closely as his long fingers withdrew a pack of cigarettes from the pocket, eyebrows raising as he shook it Frank's way. "No," Frank shook his head. "I quit."

"Did you?" Gerard chuckled. He inhaled deeply, the cigarette's tip shining in the darkness of the evening. "Or are you just too polite to take one?"

"I really did quit," so what if it was only two weeks since his last one? Frank was feeling very strong for refusing. "These things kill you, you know."

"So does everything else. From all the addictions I've gone through, these and coffee are probably

the most harmless."

"Were there a lot?"

"Oh, pretty much everything," Gerard waved his hand dismissively. "We'll get to that eventually."

"Is it art school night?"

"I think so. But I want to show you something first, if you don't mind. It's just a couple of minutes' walk."

It was cold, but Frank didn't mind. He was used to spending hours outside in the cold, an experience he had gained by being a beginner journalist all these years ago, so he nodded and brought his jacket tighter around himself as Gerard pushed forward. He wasn't walking as fast anymore, maybe to make it easier for Frank to keep up or maybe because he looked genuinely fascinated by the buildings they were passing. For the first two or three minutes, all Frank could see when he looked his way was the side of Gerard's jawline, his head tilted back as he admired the facades. He hardly seemed to notice his cigarette burning out without being touched, and Frank reached for it as it was about halfway done.

His hand brushing Gerard's is what brought his attention back to presence. His steps faltered and he looked almost surprised to find Frank still by his side. He recovered quickly, though, and only smiled when he let go of the cigarette and watched Frank inhale.

God. Frank fucking loved smoking.

"So?" he asked, words coming out of his mouth along with a cloud of smoke. "Where are we going?"

"Art school night," Gerard reminded him gently. "Just bear with me."

It really wasn't far. Before he knew it, Frank was standing in front of an inconspicuous building he could have easily mistaken for living quarters if it wasn't for the red, neon light informing everyone they had the pleasure of looking at the School of Visual Arts. It was nothing like what Frank had in mind when he thought of art schools in New York, and he could feel himself frowning as he took it in. Gerard's laughter sounded in the air as he pulled out another cigarette for himself, shaking a pack Frank's way again. He was a bad, bad influence; Frank didn't even hesitate this time as he pulled one out, his eyelids fluttering as he leaned over the flame Gerard provided.

There was a deep sigh from Gerard when he leaned over the nearest lamppost.

"Oh, man," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. "It changed."

Frank scrambled for his recorder in between the inhales of the cigarette. "When?" he asked. "It's so close to the club, when was the last time you came up here?"

"It's partially why I've always been associated with *House*," Gerard mumbled around his own smoke. "It wasn't always called *House*, it was *Labyrinth* before that. It was very conveniently placed, a walking distance from school, and I'll let you know this place," he pointed at the building in front of him. "had its fair share of people who were wildly interested in gay striptease clubs."

"You don't say."

"Yeah, gay artists in the New York school of art, who would have thought?" Gerard laughed softly. "But to answer your question, I haven't been here in years. I know it's close, but I never had any

reasons to venture out here after I dropped out."

"You dropped out?"

"Was forced to, really," Gerard shrugged. "Life wasn't what it is now. There were hardly any scholarships to chase, and even if there were, I don't think I was actually good enough to get one. I went to art school because drawing was all I knew, but it doesn't mean I was talented."

"Bullshit," Frank interjected. "You drew your childhood basement from memory with a pen, and it looks like a fucking photograph."

"See, this is where it gets tricky. You would think realism is the hardest to accomplish, right?" he shot Frank a quick look and got a confirmative nod in response. "Yeah, exactly, but it isn't. Sure, you need to train your hand to do what you want it to and learn how to look at things, the perspective and shit, but you *can* learn it if you try hard enough. It's the abstract that's harder to accomplish and also, unfortunately, what people in places like this are looking for."

"What's complicated about abstract?" Frank pressed further. "I mean, show me a person who couldn't do what, let's say, Pollock did."

"Mm, but show me a person who *did* what Pollock did," Gerard hummed, piercing Frank with a glance. When Frank failed to come up with an example – he was getting used to Gerard being right most of the time, and if he didn't find him fantastic, he would probably find it annoying – Gerard smiled again and nodded. "That's what I mean. If you want to make it, you need to be unconventional. Realism is overrated and boring. Schools like this look for talent before anything else, someone revolutionary, someone who is doing something no one has ever done before. This is why after a little over a year, I knew I would have to drop out. It took a little longer than that, but once I realized I was no Beksinski, there was nothing motivating me anymore."

"Who?" Frank asked softly. Gerard rolled his eyes but pulled out his phone all the same and typed quickly, turning the screen Frank's way. "Oh, dude, this is disturbing."

"But kind of awesome, isn't it?"

"It's a half-eaten skeleton on a cross, of course it's fucking awesome."

Gerard laughed, hiding his phone back in his pocket and turning his gaze back at the building. The smile grew sad as he stood there for a moment, inhaling his cigarette and not talking. "It was financially hard, mostly," he stated eventually. "My parents weren't the richest people on Earth, and my brother was still in high school by the time I enrolled here. They were good people, and they were also sincere. I accepted it when they told me they couldn't support me anymore."

"Ouch."

"Well, yes and no," Gerard dismissed it. "I wanted my brother to get through high school in one piece. He was a sickly kid, and keeping him alive cost a lot. It was more important than me drawing things, so it didn't hurt as much as you may think. I mean, wouldn't you do the same?"

"An only child here," Frank allowed himself a small smile. "But I guess I would if it was my mom. Priorities, yeah?"

"Exactly, priorities. They gave me enough money to get me through the first few months. It wasn't the easiest task to manage school and be a shitty bartender at the same time, but I did it for a year or so. God, I thought I knew what exhaustion meant in high school, but it was nothing compared to how absolutely drained I was in that first year in college."

“How did you cope with that?”

“The worst possible way, probably,” Gerard’s lips curled into a self-deprecating grimace. “It was a strange feeling. I would be so dead tired I’d be staggering, but a second someone mentioned a party, I’d be the first to say yes.”

“But that’s a good thing, right?” Frank asked, putting the bud of his cigarette out on the lamppost next to Gerard’s shoulder. “You said before that you were a shy kid. Isn’t it good that you opened up to people?”

“In general, yes, but maybe not with the crowd I was surrounding myself with.”

“Gay?” Frank offered, not really meaning it.

“Very gay,” Gerard, to his surprise, confirmed. He glanced at the recorder still clutched in Frank’s hand and met his eyes for a moment. “See, I was never… no, I *was* shy, but it was because I didn’t belong in high school. It didn’t mean I was some freak of nature, though. I had the same desires and urges any other guy in his twenties has, and once Anthony opened this world for me, it was like a dam has broken. This place,” he gestured at the school again. “Only made it worse.”

“Worse how?”

“Fucking,” Gerard snickered a little and then snorted as he saw Frank’s eyes widening. “God, Frank – so much fucking.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Oh, I am. I am very serious. Everyone fucked everyone in here. It was a never-ending orgy, and I could count on one hand the number of evenings I spent alone. Art is passionate, or whatever other excuse you want to come up with. The point is – that was tiring too. Very freeing, I guess, in a way that it helped me get comfortable with my body and how it worked and taught me how to be confident while simultaneously being naked, but after a couple of months of constant sex, I didn’t know how much more I could give.”

Frank couldn’t quite imagine that. Sure, he’d fucked multiple people in his life and had done other things that could widely be described as sexual, but what Gerard was telling him about was a different universe altogether. He believed he had exaggerated a little – there was just no way he had slept with someone every night, but maybe there was a point to this emphasis. It showed Frank the message Gerard wanted to deliver loud and clear, and he winced a little. He *liked* sex, of course he did, but he also couldn’t imagine having so little choice over when and who he’d have it with that he would be getting tired of it.

“Why didn’t you just stop?” he found himself asking.

“Eventually I did. I wanted to fit in, remember? If everyone was having sex, and they wanted to include me in it, then I wasn’t going to refuse. I didn’t want to be an outcast again.”

“Jesus, Gerard.”

“I know,” he smiled. “Sex is a big part of my story, I don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Sorry, you’re gonna have to sit through it if you want it to be genuine.”

Frank could sit through it just fine. It was a question of whether he could go home tonight and not think about all the countless, nameless, faceless bodies Gerard had seen and touched. It was hardly professional of him to think of Gerard any differently than a subject of an interview, and Gerard definitely wasn't making it easy for him to prevent it.

"It's fine," he pressed on, biting his cheek. "Just tell me what happened next."

"I quit being a bartender and found a job in *Labyrinth*."

"Just like that?"

"With many minor breakdowns in between, a few major ones, dropping out of college after not even a month of working there, and a lot of booze. Yep."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe," Gerard grinned. "But that was very liberating, too. I exchanged having actual sex to selling an illusion of it, and I felt better. I still *had* sex, obviously, but it was only when I felt like it, not out of some sort of weird obligation to my peers. All in all, I think it worked out just fine, wouldn't you say?"

It worked out how Frank wouldn't have been able to predict. In some way, he figured it was a typical story of a college kid being forced to escape to some bodily work – be it striptease or prostitution, to support themselves in dark times of financial struggles, but it had never sounded alluring to Frank. It had always been terrifying. During his own college experience, he had often felt the dread of running out of money and had, once or twice, been forced to consider if going out on the streets wouldn't have been his only choice. There had been nothing romantic about it, however – the fear and desperation hadn't been romantic, the hunger he had felt hadn't been, either, and the humiliation he had been prepared to undertake had not an ounce of romance in it, either.

Gerard, though – Gerard made it sound magical. Still heartbreaking and horrifying, but his voice never waivered as he went on and on about his struggles, and it took Frank a while to realize why it was. He had made his peace with them now. Years down the line, he could talk about his painful past and not be afraid of it anymore because that's all it was at that point – a history, never to repeat itself. He was happy now with what he was doing, and the fact that he had managed to turn the tide for himself and make a living out of what had been merely the means to survive was honestly inspiring.

Yes, that was it. When Frank looked at him, he was inspired.

"You're doing great," he told Gerard honestly. "And I am glad we're doing this. You may not see it, but your story can stimulate other people to make changes in their lives."

Gerard scoffed, finally turning away from the school and facing him. It was clear he didn't believe a word Frank was telling him, but Frank made it his personal goal to convince him, one recording at a time. He smiled when Gerard frowned and paused the recording ostentatiously, hiding the recorder in his pocket and cracking his knuckles afterward.

"I'm wondering," he said slowly, his eyes gliding over Frank's face. "Seeing how there's been so much sex talk between us…"

Frank's jaw dropped to the ground.

"What?"

“Frank,” Gerard smiled sweetly at him. “Would you like Jake’s number? I can guarantee he wouldn’t disappoint you.”

Oh. Jake. He had forgotten all about Jake, including his naked body and numerous tattoos.

“You guarantee?” he pointed at Gerard, forcing himself to smirk. “Speaking from experience, then?”

“No, no, absolutely not. I don’t hook up with people I work with.”

Frank didn’t allow himself to dwell on it and bit his tongue before he could say something foolish like how they still hadn’t signed a contract and how Gerard still wasn’t officially the subject of his interview or his associate in this project. He reached into his pocket again, instead, and pulled out a card he put there when he had found out how useless it had become.

“Neither do I,” he schooled his expression to be solemn and relished in how the wrinkles around Gerard’s eyes deepened as he fought with satisfaction. “It would be really awkward to hook up with a work colleague of my boss, wouldn’t it?”

Gerard plucked his assistant card from between his fingers and turned it around several times before depositing it safely back in Frank’s pocket.

“Yes, it really would,” he agreed with a smile. He leaned back a second later and sighed, running his hand up his hair. “Which way is your place?”

“Miles away from here. At least a twenty-minute drive by taxi, maybe more since I have no fucking idea where I am right now.”

There was still a glimmer of a smile in Gerard’s eyes as he extended his cigarette pack – fuck, Frank was really going to have to buy his own on his way home. There was no way he wasn’t already back to a full-blown addiction.

“You can catch a taxi anywhere, and I’m just a few blocks this way,” he pointed in the direction they came from before. “Walk me home?”

It was a perfect opportunity to ask more questions or gently breach the subject of Gerard’s beginnings in the striptease industry, but Frank’s recorder stayed firmly hidden as he nodded and inhaled the smoke of his cigarette. He didn’t want to work anymore. It was close to midnight now and the only thing missing from making this a perfect evening was a cup of hot coffee.

“Damsel in distress,” he commented and loved how Gerard didn’t even try to deny it, simply sending him a cheeky grin. “Fine, whatever,” he sighed. “Lead the way.”

*

Frank knew he should be walking over to him to avoid being even more late than he already was – New York traffic, as Gerard would say – but he felt frozen in place. He had never had such a vivid moment of clarity in his life as the one he was experiencing at that moment, and it took all he had not to turn around and run away from it. Most people he knew would probably be thrilled to discover what he was discovering, but Frank mostly felt scared. Terrified, even, to find out there were no answers to the questions he was asking.

It had been his choice to meet up in Central Park. There was no real reason for it other than not feeling suffocated by closed spaces, be it cafes or clubs, and the need to breathe in the fresh air. Or as fresh as it could get in New York, but Frank wasn't one to complain. Maybe it was overrated, but Central Park was famous for a reason, and he was not below admitting it had a certain charm, especially with the approaching winter. Something was almost magical about the snow sprinkling from the sky while one looked over the city's panorama. It was cold as hell, too, and as he strolled down the alleys at midday on a Tuesday, he had begun to question whether they wouldn't be forced to move it someplace else after all.

Then he saw Gerard.

He had leaned against the railing next to the lake and must have been there for a few minutes as tiny snowflakes had accumulated on top of his shoulders. There was nothing extraordinary about how he was dressed, either – just a dark coat and dark pants sliding into his stage high-heeled boots, but somehow he still made it look divine. Frank couldn't say what it was. Maybe it was the dreamy look on his face as he took in the city in the distance, or how the winter wind blew through his hair, making it look soft and causing Gerard to tug it behind his ear constantly, or maybe it was the almost nervous spasm of his hands clenching and unclenching from around the railing as he was waiting for Frank to show up.

Whatever it was, one thing was certain – Frank had never wanted anyone more than he wanted Gerard at that moment.

It was a dangerous feeling to experience. The contract felt heavy in Frank's bag, just two pieces of paper seemingly weighing a ton, and they weren't even halfway through Gerard's story. It was a business relationship now, or would soon become it, and Frank couldn't let himself fall for Gerard. Even if he waited for the biography to be finished, there was still nothing he could ever do about it. Frank didn't date. He never had and never would, making his peace with the fact that he would most likely die alone. He didn't know how to date and had analyzed his habits long enough to know people wouldn't stand being with him for long. He was a workaholic, he was messy, and he was possessive. He was impulsive, too emotional, and got attached too quickly. As if Gerard wasn't a perfect example of that. Frank couldn't even believe that his stomach could tighten like that in anticipation and need after only knowing the man for two weeks.

It couldn't – and wouldn't – work. There was another aspect Frank had never thought of before, which came crashing down on him as he looked at Gerard smiling to himself in Central Park. He was simply too beautiful not to have someone waiting for him at home, and not just anyone, either. Another Jake, maybe, or someone equally handsome and alluring. He had had a perfect opportunity to prove to Frank he was interested, too, the last time they had seen each other. He could have invited Frank over to his apartment using any of the excuses there were. He could have said he wanted to listen to how the interview had gone or told Frank he could make him that coffee Frank had bitched about their entire walk back to Gerard's apartment complex. If he was interested, he would have done more than smile and wave before disappearing behind the door.

Frank couldn't really blame him. He was just a journalist. For someone as creative and influential as Gerard, he must have looked about as important as a fly on a wall.

Gerard didn't see him come over and flinched slightly when Frank leaned over the railing. He didn't look his way, but he smiled when he saw Gerard's head snapping to the side to take him in. Gazing over would have been a mistake; the heart in his chest was already beating faster than he would have liked. Wordlessly he extended one of the coffee cups he was holding and smiled wider when Gerard took it from him and lifted the lid to take a sniff.

“It’s mocha again,” he explained, taking a sip of his own latte. “Dark chocolate this time.”

“Bitter coffee for a bitter story, very thoughtful.”

That made Frank look over, expecting Gerard to be frowning or wearing a sad smile on his face. He was smiling, but it was in no way sad. It was gentle, instead, as he reached over to curl his hair behind his ear once more. God, he was gorgeous.

“How bitter?” Frank asked.

“Very. I think art school was the highlight of my life. It all kind of went downhill from there.”

“That’s to be expected, though. No one in their right mind voluntarily chooses to be a stripper.”

“Some people do,” Gerard corrected him softly. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, it’s a profession like any other. It can be very artistic if you know how to approach it, so don’t belittle it,” he pointed the finger at Frank, but he must have known Frank understood it because he didn’t press on with his lecturing. “You’re right to assume I didn’t choose it voluntarily, however, at least not at first.”

Frank’s recorder had been turned on since he approached, so he only leaned an inch closer to Gerard to pick up the words better.

“It was your way to earn money, right?”

“Not for long,” Gerard shook his head. “I think I knew I was going to quit school. My grades were getting increasingly worse with each class I took, I was highly unmotivated and so bloody tired that I wanted to quit for a while. I felt wrung out and wronged. Art has always been my escape, and suddenly it was attacking me.”

“Dancing used to be your escape too, though, didn’t it?”

“Ah, so you *do* listen to what I say,” Gerard smirked knowingly. “That’s why I chose it, actually. I had a wrong idea regarding what striptease really was, of course, thinking it would be just spinning around on a pole or something, but it was the closest thing I could find to what I needed at that moment. I had no training when it came to dancing, and I was still terrible at it back then, so no dance school would accept me even if I tried. This seemed like a perfect solution – I could dance *and* get paid for it.”

“How did you get the job?” Frank asked. “Are there, like, interviews?”

“There are but probably not one you’re thinking of. No one asked to see my resume.”

“Can I take a wild guess?”

“Shoot.”

“They asked you to dance.”

Gerard’s laugh rang through the air as he leaned harder against the railing, hiding behind his hair. Frank wished he could reach over and brush it away so he could see the smile, but he resorted to gripping his coffee cup tighter and mimicking his posture. For a while, they stood like that, Gerard’s shoulders shaking from laughter and Frank forcing himself not to look morose as they both took in the buildings in the distance. Eventually, the snickering turned into a quiet wheeze and then into a couple of deeper breaths before Gerard tilted his head back again.

“Dancing came later,” he explained. “First, they asked me to undress.”

“And do what?”

“Nothing. I just stood there naked as the manager – his name was Noah – looked at me. I thought I was prepared to be scrutinized after having so much sex before, but it must have been the most awkward moment of my life. I swear I’ve never felt more anxious than I did then.”

“They didn’t even ask you to twirl or something?”

“Nope,” Gerard grinned at the memory. “They asked me to turn, obviously, and spent an unusual amount of time staring at my ass, but apparently, my dancing skills were not the priority.”

Frank couldn’t help it – he looked, too, and blushed immediately when he realized Gerard had caught it. He laughed again and wriggled against the railing a little, hips swaying from one side to the other, as Frank forced himself to drag his eyes back to his face. He hadn’t consciously thought about Gerard’s body before, not like this, at least. Gerard occupied his mind pretty much twenty-four-seven at that point, both when Frank worked on the biography in between the interviews and when he couldn’t sleep at night, but it had always been just his face, or his smile, or his hands. His thoughts hadn’t been overly sexual, either, not in the classical sense of the word. Ever since he had seen Gerard’s performance in that navy-blue dress, he did think about how he would look waking up in the morning and how he would stroll, naked, around their flat, but it had never been explicit. Frank hadn’t allowed himself to dwell on how Gerard would sound moaning or how his muscles would tense in pleasure. It had been innocent, mostly, and easily explainable as admiring someone beautiful for purely aesthetic purposes.

As he looked now, it was critically different as he realized that Gerard wasn’t just charming. He was also really fucking hot.

“You said you were horrible at dancing,” Frank forced out after he managed to collect himself. “Did they teach you how to do it? Did you have to learn yourself?”

“A little bit of both,” Gerard hummed, still amused. “I was thrilled when they told me I was hired, but it quickly faded as Noah explained how my job would look. There were a lot of requirements. I had to keep a strict diet and was told they wouldn’t let me go on stage until I lost a few inches from around my middle. I was to train with the guys during their rehearsals and was given a gym pass I had to go to four times a week. They told me to strengthen the muscles in my arms and legs so I could pole-dance and gave me a whole list of other exercises I had to perfect.”

“What? That’s fucking dumb.”

“It isn’t, not really. I was supposed to earn a living with my body, of course it had to be perfect.”

“Did it?” Frank swallowed hard, thinking of the right way to deliver his thoughts. “I mean, you look good. You look really fucking good, and you’re forty-five. I can’t imagine you needed to lose any weight back then.”

“I’ve struggled with weight. Or with eating disorders, however you wanna call it. I wasn’t fat then, but I wasn’t skinny, either.”

“But skinny isn’t realistic,” Frank groaned. “What’s with everyone’s obsession about being skinny? If I was a customer, I’d much rather look at a guy and know there was something to grab should we end up together. Something other than bones.”

“You wouldn’t be saying it if you saw me then.”

“I absolutely would.”

Gerard threw him a sideway look before sighing and reaching into his pocket. Frank watched him unlock his phone and scroll for a moment, eyebrows knitted together in concentration. When the same phone was thrust in front of his face a moment later, he had to squint to see what Gerard was showing him on the dimmed screen.

“See?” Gerard said quietly. “That’s what I mean.”

It was a photo of him from years ago. As Frank took a closer look, this comparison made him realize that Gerard really was older than he looked because he seemed like a teenager in the photo he was showing him. He must have been older, though – the old, orange date on the picture listed it as 1999, and after doing some quick math, Frank realized Gerard was already over twenty then. His face was baby-like, the long, black hair did nothing to make him look older, and his smile was shy and innocent, almost sweet. At least that didn’t change, Frank decided as he glanced up to take in the present-day Gerard, and then he focused back on the photo for a moment.

Yes, Gerard had not been a skinny guy then, but Frank would never go as far as to call him fat. He had simply had a body, nothing more, nothing less, and Frank knew he would have fallen for him the same way then as he was doing now. His gaze flicked up, meeting Gerard’s eyes, and he schooled his face to a serious, solemn expression as he handed the phone back.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, watching a blush immediately spread on Gerard’s cheeks. “And you were beautiful then, too. I don’t know if Noah couldn’t see it or if the industry was just fucked up, but if this was how you looked when they told you to lose weight, then they were simply wrong. There was *nothing* wrong with how you looked, Gerard. Nothing at all.”

“Maybe there wasn’t,” Gerard agreed slowly, proving to Frank that as soon as he was away from the stage, he was horrible at accepting compliments. “But I still couldn’t dance.”

“That’s something different, although I’m sure you’re being overly modest with this, too.”

“I’m really not. Some guys taught me for two weeks, but my first performance was still a disaster.”

Frank cocked an eyebrow, stealing a look Gerard’s way. He caught him already smiling and rolled his eyes at him. “I don’t believe you.”

“I could prove you wrong,” Gerard pointed out. “Noah recorded the performance. He said he did that with every new dancer so they could look at the tape later and learn from their mistakes, and I know I still have it somewhere at home. We’d just need a VHS player to play it.”

The knot in Frank’s stomach tightened.

“I have one.”

“*Wh*y?”

“I’m an old-fashioned kind of guy,” Frank grinned at Gerard’s astonishment. “I don’t use it often, but I refuse to watch Evil Dead or Suspiria on anything other than that. It’s just not the same experience when the quality is good.”

“Oh, you really are a man after my own heart,” Gerard swooned, making Frank laugh. “Suspiria? Seriously?”

“What? You didn’t have a crush on Pavlov?”

“Frank,” Gerard scoffed, and Frank only laughed harder. “No, man, I had a crush on Olga. Don’t tell me you didn’t.”

“Gay, remember?” Frank pointed at himself. “It was a pity there was no one to crush on in there, but it was a good movie. Kind of fucked up but good, nonetheless.”

“Good taste.”

“I have that,” he agreed. “So, you wanna bring the tape over? I could use seeing it, actually. Maybe there are some frames I could use for the biography.”

“You’re gonna regret it,” Gerard warned him softly, hugging the coffee cup closer to his chest. “But hey, be my guest. Write down your address for me, and we can meet up in an hour.”

*

Frank was elbows deep in cleaning his flat when the doorbell rang. He hadn’t had much time to tidy up the mess – barely forty-something minutes since he had run up the stairs to his flat and thrown open the door to find the cataclysm inside. Living alone had its perks, so Frank rarely bothered with making up the bed or putting away dirty dishes immediately after using them. It hadn’t been as bad as it could have, he figured; at least there was no dirty underwear lying on the ground, and he had vacuumed maybe three days prior, but it still hadn’t been perfect.

Frank needed it to be pristine.

Impressing Gerard had become his life mission. He had wanted to do it since he’d met him, that much was obvious, but it had been this striking realization in Central Park that launched that desire to a whole new level. It was now something he was doing actively, actually putting his mind to it, and it was getting on his nerves. Suddenly he cared whether there were creases on the fabric of his t-shirt or if a t-shirt was even a good choice of clothing to wear while meeting Gerard, and he was genuinely considering a visit to a barber to get his hair under control. He thought about every word leaving his mouth, every expression crossing his face, and every nervous reflex he had hardly any control over anyway.

Living on the seventh floor had always annoyed him, but he found its advantages now. Buzzing Gerard in, he had just enough time to hide the cleaning products under the sink and put the coffee machine on. His grey sweatpants would have to suffice. He figured it was better than welcoming Gerard inside with nothing but his boxer shorts on.

“Holy hell,” Gerard’s breath came out in a rush when Frank pulled the door open. When he lifted his head to look at him, his hair was plastered to his forehead, and his mouth was parted as he gulped the air in greedily. “If I didn’t earn a living dancing, I think I’d have a heart attack somewhere between the third and fourth floor. You guys should really invest in an elevator.”

“Don’t whine,” Frank scolded him with a smile, moving to the side to let Gerard in. “Mr. Johnson across the hall is seventy-three, and he manages daily. With groceries!”

“Hey, I’m carrying a hefty piece of history here with me,” Gerard patted the side of his jacket where Frank could just about make out the box of a VHS tape sticking out. “And besides, I’m a smoker and didn’t have time to get used to it like Mr. Johnson did.”

There was an opportunity there, one that Frank saw as clear as day. He turned to close the door behind Gerard, grateful for a chance to avoid his gaze even for a split second as he wondered if he

should give in to the urge. He could extend the invitation. It didn't have to mean anything other than a friendly gesture or a joke, yet it bore connotations in Frank's mind that he wasn't sure he was ready to explore. He needed to know more about Gerard first, needed to know him longer than two weeks to be able to do that. He needed to know if there was even a chance, to begin with.

"You could run up and down the stairs in *House*," he suggested. "Work on your form."

Gerard, of course, saw right through him.

"Or I could keep coming over."

"You'd need to bribe me with something useful."

"Hey, does that count?" Gerard smiled wider at him and reached into his pocket. Frank expected to receive the tape and felt his eyebrows raise as he found himself with a small, red box. "This is officially a movie night, man. You can't do that without popcorn."

It was hardly night and hardly a movie night, too, unless Gerard was planning on staying for longer than Frank had anticipated. It was awfully sweet that he had bought popcorn for them, nonetheless, and Frank forced himself to roll his eyes while smiling simultaneously.

"Fair," he concluded. "Alright, make yourself at home. I'll be right there."

Listening to the kernels pop in the microwave, Frank debated whether he was making a mistake. Gerard was scarcely the first longer interview he did. Some of them had spanned as long as a couple of weeks in the past, and yet Frank had never had the subject come over to eat popcorn and watch movies, regardless of whether or not the movie was detrimental for the interview to work in the first place. He had never had anyone over, not even that one lowkey politician who had refused to answer Frank's questions but had been more than willing to invite him into his bed. It had always been away from Frank's life; interviews were done in cafes, restaurants, clubs, or – in the worst-case scenario – at someone else's house. He didn't want people over because if something went wrong, they'd know where to look for him, and the last thing Frank needed was an angry musician or official banging on his door.

Gerard, however, was a different story. Frank couldn't imagine not wanting him to keep coming over, which was a warning sign he promptly decided to ignore.

"Sorry for the mess," he apologized, taking a quick look at his cleaned-up living room. Gerard was sprawled on his couch, taking the expression of making himself at home maybe a little too literally as he propped his feet on Frank's coffee table. Frank couldn't even be mad about it and simply handed him one of the coffee mugs he was balancing in one hand, dumping the popcorn bowl on Gerard's lap. "If I knew I would have guests, I'd clean up."

"You did clean up," Gerard grinned at him. "I can smell the air freshener, you know?"

Frank's stomach did a solid flip as he blushed. "Busted."

"Don't worry about it, I'm flattered. Here, you're going to need that," he handed Frank the VHS tape. "There are rules, though; if you can't accept them, then we're not watching it."

"Rules?"

"No laughing," he pointed his finger at Frank. "You'll want to laugh, but please at least try to be subtle about it. I'm very sensitive," he added with a smile. "And no commenting on what you're about to see."

“No chance. You’re getting your compliments, buddy.”

“These are fine if you can find anything to compliment me on. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you – it was as bad as it could possibly get.”

Frank didn’t believe it could be as bad as Gerard was saying. It had been his first performance ever, so the anxiety was to be expected, but Frank didn’t think anyone could get as far as Gerard did without having some hidden talent no one had known about before. He approached the video with a healthy amount of doubt. There was no way it would be bad, especially not to a layman like himself, and Frank expected to be thoroughly entertained throughout the entire time. Even when he put the VHS tape in and marched back towards the couch after checking if it didn’t need to be rewound – it didn’t – he still believed he had the general idea of what to expect. Some skimpy clothes, a pole, maybe a knowing smirk.

He pressed play while sinking onto the seat next to Gerard and then immediately forgot every assumption he had made before.

The clothing was not skimpy – it was non-existent. The video started in the middle of the performance, or at least Frank thought so after he located a thin bathrobe lying on the ground beneath Gerard’s feet, but his mind quickly provided a couple of missing seconds from the show. Gerard must have walked out in it, probably teased a little sliding his hands up and down his body, and then shrugged it off. What was left was a pair of tight, silver boxers clinging to Gerard’s hips and the top of his thighs and a pair of knee-high socks. The scene was pink, that was all Frank could say about it, but the teddy bear lying on the side indicated clearly what it was supposed to imitate.

Frank swallowed hard and focused on Gerard, but that didn’t make things easier. He looked way younger, his face as gentle as it had looked in the photo Gerard had shown him, but there was a change to his body already. It was more toned, more muscular, and as he rolled his hips and smirked, biting his lip, he still looked more like a teenager than a grown man. Too young for what he was doing, was Frank’s instant impression, and he felt dread mixed with arousal filling up his stomach. Gerard’s leg bent, and he swiftly slid one of his socks off when turning around, making a makeshift pair of handcuffs out of fabric.

Frank’s stomach swooped, jumped, and then dropped. He shifted his weight a little and felt the distinctive pressure in his abdomen, one he couldn’t mistake for anything else than what it was.

“What the fuck,” he heard his own whisper. Gerard on screen was currently tilting his head with a candle in his hand, letting the hot wax drop onto his chest. “What—”

“I told you. It’s messed up.”

Fuck. Fuck, Frank forgot Gerard – the real-life Gerard, a forty-five years old man, was sitting next to him. He didn’t dare look over at him, too aware that deciding to wear sweatpants had been a horrible idea, and lifted one of his feet onto the couch to block Gerard’s view of his cock slowly filling in between his legs. It had no right to be hot. This outrageous play of pretending to be a child while being lewd and obscene should be a clear sign for Frank’s body to feel disgusted, not turned on. But it was Gerard, nonetheless, and Frank *knew* he hadn’t been a kid when the video had been recorded. He had had to be in his early twenties, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three at the time, and he was hot. Stunning and beautiful, the way he was now, but also really fucking hot. Frank shifted again, and the movement sent sparks from his half-hard dick up to his chest.

“Well, yeah,” he forced himself to agree. Stealing a sideways look at Gerard, after all, he felt relieved to find him staring intently at the TV. “But you’re also a gross liar. You said you didn’t

know how to dance."

"You think I did?"

"You think you didn't?"

The screen displayed Gerard with a teddy bear pressed to his crotch at that moment, a falsely coy smile on his face and his heady gaze, and Frank felt faint when his free hand ran behind the toy and gripped the hem of the silver boxers. He watched, mesmerized, how young Gerard maneuvered the fabric down his thighs, his calves, and then off entirely without missing a beat and successfully avoiding showing too much to the audience. He somehow managed to fling the bathrobe up from the floor with his foot, too, and catch it in the air, and it was around his middle as he gave a wink to the camera and threw the teddy bear to the first row of the audience.

Frank would maybe applaud him for doing such a fantastic job if he didn't instantaneously realize two things at once.

He was fully hard in his sweatpants just from watching Gerard perform, a thing that hadn't happened to him in at least ten years, was the first. The second was the fact that the bathrobe on screen, curling around Gerard's waist, had bunched up as well, showing a clear line of Gerard's erection. Frank couldn't have helped it if he tried – he opened his mouth to say something constructive, but all that came out was a gasp.

"Sorry," Gerard laughed at him, somehow oblivious to the state the video left Frank in. The screen went dark after a few more moments of the audience cheering and Gerard walking off stage, but Frank thought it wasn't wise to move from the couch to withdraw the tape. "It was a messed up idea right from the get-go. I guess it was supposed to be controversial and all, but this probably appealed to people no one should ever want to have in their club. But Noah probably didn't care much. I mean, they sure paid well to be there."

Frank willed his body to calm down, the blood rushing through his veins so loud he barely heard the words Gerard was saying. He shifted again, the fabric of his sweatpants folding across his lap, and closed his eyes for a moment to take a few deeper breaths.

"It was disgusting," he said slowly, wincing when he felt Gerard freeze. "I mean the idea, not your performance. Your performance was…"

"How was it?"

"Fucking… man, I don't even know," Frank shook his head. "Good? Great? Revolutionary?"

"The greatest praise, coming from a gay guy."

"I mean it," Frank risked stealing another look at Gerard. "Everything you've told me is bullshit. You knew how to dance, you knew how to perform, and your body didn't need any additional work. Fuck, Gerard, you were amazing."

"Thank you."

"And *clearly* you loved it."

Gerard's head fell forward as he laughed, hiding behind his hair. "You noticed that, huh?"

"It was hard not to."

“You’re right about that. It *was* hard.”

“Gerard—”

“Viagra, man,” he shrugged with one shoulder, slumping lower on the couch. “They didn’t explain, and I didn’t ask. They gave me a pill, told me to pop it, so I did. I was getting more comfortable with the idea of doing drugs already, we’ll talk more about it next time, but I wasn’t dumb enough to not know what it was. I just didn’t care much. In a sense, I agree with them, even.”

Frank felt his eyes bulge out a little. “How?”

“There is nothing aesthetically pleasing in a flaccid dick,” Gerard smirked behind the curtain of his hair. “It just hangs there, and the only thing it seems to be saying is that a guy is not interested in what he’s seeing or feeling. I was supposed to convince these men in the audience that they were desirable, that I wanted to shed my clothes off for *them*. Whether they knew it was a chemically induced erection or not didn’t really matter because, in the end, the performance gave them exactly what they came there for.”

“This is…,” Frank searched for the right word for a moment, his journalist brain failing him at last. “Pretty fucked up.”

“I know, but it was what it was. It’s different now.”

“No one’s forcing Viagra down your throat anymore?”

“Nope,” Gerard replied easily. “I don’t have to pretend anymore. If I find someone interesting in the audience, I have other ways to let them know I’m into them. I don’t need to shove my hard dick in their faces.”

Frank really wouldn’t mind if Gerard did just that.

“Alright, well, that was riveting content,” he summed it up with a sigh. His stomach churned as he cleared his throat, hoping his voice wasn’t wavering. “You mind if I keep the tape for now? I don’t think there are many shots I could use in the biography, but there are a couple of close-ups of your face with the candle nearby. That could work.”

“Sure, Frankie, whatever you need,” Gerard shrugged, reaching for the popcorn bowl. “So, you mind if I stay a while? Or should I hurry it up with that?” he pointed at the still-untouched kernels. It was perhaps a safety hazard to agree to Gerard staying over, especially since Frank’s control seemed to be seeping through his fingers and rapidly evaporating, but he mentally beat himself over the head. This was good. Even if he didn’t think he had a chance to have Gerard interested in him, he was still a fascinating person, and Frank could settle for friendship. A frustrating one, for sure, but it was still better than nothing.

“Yeah, of course. You can look for Suspiria under there,” he pointed at the cupboard underneath his TV. “And I’ll be right back. You want more coffee?”

“Always.”

“Cool. You can start it when you find it, don’t hesitate.”

He walked out of the room before Gerard could agree, shuffling his feet across his flat and trying hard not to fall over and die. He felt shaken up and distracted, the images of the performance playing in his mind repeatedly, and he fought with himself for the ten seconds it took to turn the coffee machine on. Frank was familiar with how long it took the coffee to brew, and he heard the

sounds of Suspiria starting just as he was closing the bathroom door behind him. He had three minutes, give or take, but he didn't think he'd need that many.

Gerard was captivating, gorgeous, and lovely, and Frank was completely gone for him. Leaning against the door, he asked himself once again if he really wanted to go through with it, but the coffee machine in the kitchen beeped loudly, indicating the brewing process had begun, and Frank threw caution out the window. The timeframe was now narrowed to a little over two minutes, and there was no time to second-guess his decisions.

He sighed, looked down at himself, and slid a hand inside his sweatpants.

*

Frank had to jerk off twice before he found himself in any state of mind that would allow him to work on the striptease beginnings part of the biography and then another time while he was writing it. The first two times had been fairly innocent. He had pretended not to think about Gerard and had gone into it with a blank mind and a too-rough hand. The third time had been worse. The video had been playing the entire time, and it had been over even quicker than his bathroom escapade while the coffee had been brewing.

Needless to say, Frank was dreading receiving a message from Gerard regarding their next meeting spot. He was scared Gerard would ask to come over or invite him in – which was doubtful as Frank still had a suspicion there must have been something in his flat that stopped Gerard from asking him to come in the last time he had been there. He prayed for Gerard to choose a neutral territory, like a café again, a library, or even the middle of a random New York street.

It still came as a shock when he received a text early Wednesday morning, and the address led him to a cemetery.

Gerard saw him coming from afar. He was leaning against the cemetery gates with a cigarette between his lips, and Frank felt giddy for a moment as he watched him toss a half-smoked stick away from himself and crumble it with the sole of his shoe. He started to smile despite guilt creeping in over what he had done to the image of this man, but it diminished and fell as he looked at Gerard more closely. He didn't look happy to see him. If anything, he looked sullen to even be in the vicinity of the graveyard, and what little did Frank know about reading people told him he would rather be anywhere but there. His back was hunched, shoulders pulled high to try and shield himself, and he pulled his jacket tight around himself when Frank approached.

A part of Frank still felt terrible. A bigger part wanted to cross the distance between them faster and pull Gerard into a hug.

It wasn't allowed, though, or at least he didn't think it was. He was still hazy about their relationship, whether they were friends or merely work associates, so he opted for an encouraging smile and handing over a cup of coffee he now customarily got for Gerard every time they met.

"You're alright?" he asked when Gerard's fingers curled around the cup immediately.

"No," Gerard replied honestly. "I want you to meet someone today, and it will be tough to introduce you two. Just being here… it's been years since I've come here."

"Meet someone? What, you dated a gravedigger or something?"

Gerard winced, efficiently killing Frank's desire to joke more. He sent him an apologetic look Gerard seemed to accept and followed him in silence. They walked down the cemetery alleys without a word between them, Frank's mind jumping between the need to say *something* and regretting turning the recorder on and wasting minutes on recording silence. It was very out of character for Gerard, too, to not be rambling about something or at least introducing the idea of what they would talk about today. Frank wasn't completely in the dark. He remembered the list Gerard had made when they had first agreed to go down memory lane, and he knew what was coming after the story of his striptease beginnings. It only unsettled him to be having this discussion at a cemetery.

He turned out to be right in his suspicions, too. Far away from the cemetery gates, at the very center of the graveyard, Gerard stopped suddenly in front of a small, poor-looking headstone squeezed between two massive ones on each side. He seemed to lose his remaining strength and plumped down onto a narrow bench in front of it with a heavy sigh. No invitation was extended, but Frank followed suit and slowly sat next to him. There were questions he could be asking, but they were all pointless. The tombstone spelled the answers for him as clear as day. There were two names carved in stone, one lined with silver filling and one bare, unfinished, barely visible. Frank felt a kick to his stomach when he wondered if the letters of Gerard's name would be filled with silver, too, after he died and got buried there.

"Frank," Gerard said softly when he leaned forward and pressed his elbows to his thighs. His face was hidden in his hands, and his words were muffled, but Frank could hear him just fine. He gestured at the headstone and shook slightly in the cold, or perhaps due to extreme emotions. "Meet Bert."

Bert, or Robert as Gerard explained next, had been an aspiring musician when they had first met back at the beginning of Gerard's career. He had been a few years younger than him, barely out of school, but he had set out to conquer the world with the music he'd made. Naively, he had expected New York to just hand him success on a silver platter and had very quickly found himself in despair when things hadn't worked out immediately.

"I never found out how he ended up mixing music for Noah," Gerard said. "I'd seen him a couple of times in the club, talking to sound technicians, but he never approached any of us. He just provided tapes, and I didn't even know I was working with his stuff until the day he decided to introduce himself. It was an accident, mostly. If I didn't show up early to work that day, I would have missed him."

"Was he forbidden from talking to you guys?"

"I don't think so," Gerard worried his thumb between his teeth, thinking. Frank noticed he did that a lot when he was pondering something. "I mean, we exchanged greetings every now and then, it wasn't like we were completely ignoring each other, but he never came into the dressing rooms, and we never approached him when he was checking his tapes. No one told us not to, it was just how things worked."

"But you approached him that day."

"No," Gerard smiled a little. "He approached me."

Bert had followed Gerard into the dressing room that day and hadn't bothered knocking. It had caught Gerard off guard to find someone else in there with him, with his shirt tugged off and his pants halfway down his thighs, but he hadn't felt overly scrutinized. He explained how it had been a different feeling to be naked on stage than to be naked in the privacy of backstage, but Bert had looked strictly at his face and nowhere else and had paid little attention to the trembling of

Gerard's hand as he had extended his. They had officially met like that, Gerard almost bare and Bert grinning and complimenting him on his latest performance, and it had been easy. From the very start, they had understood each other.

"He liked my performances," Gerard's voice was quiet. "He said I gave meaning to his work because I knew exactly how to work with his material. He was surprised to see how well I noted the bass line of the piece and the critical points in songs where a sudden movement of my body was required, and it was incredible to him. For someone as inexperienced as I still was back then, to have someone say something like that meant a lot to me."

"So what happened?" Frank pressed on.

"You know, the usual," Gerard's grin turned genuinely joyful for a moment. "He asked if I wanted to come over to his place so we could figure out some songs I wanted to dance to, I said yes."

"And did you? Figure out songs, I mean?"

"The only music we figured out were moans and grunts," Gerard admitted. "I didn't even hesitate. We talked on our way from the club back to his place, and he told me about his life – how he didn't have enough money to go to school, how he couldn't stand his homophobic parents beating the crap out of him, how he ran away. His story resonated with me, even if I didn't have it even half as bad as he did. I knew he understood my struggles, and he was probably the first person who didn't judge me for dropping out of school."

"Others did?"

"Oh, yes. Everyone, Noah included, kept saying how I should have stayed in SVA. I was, in their minds, a rich boy who got bored of making art and decided to try his luck with striptease. No one had ever bothered to sit down with me and ask my reasons for doing that. No one but Bert, that is."

"He made you feel less lonely."

"Very much so," Gerard agreed. "I became dependent on him very quickly, too, and it took me too long to realize it was actually the other way around. The sex was great, and our conversations afterward were even better. We had the same taste in music, movies, comics. Bert felt like my soulmate right from the start, so I didn't even stop and think about what I was doing when he asked if he could move in with me."

"When was this?"

"A month or so after I first met him," Gerard sighed. He met Frank's gaze briefly and shook his head with a chuckle. "I know, I know, don't look at me like that. I lied to myself back then, saying it was an economic decision. We both paid more than we had for our separate flats. It was wise to move in together and split the cost."

"Let me guess – you didn't."

"Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner," Gerard scoffed. "No, we didn't split the cost. He paid half the first rent after moving in, and that was the only time he did."

"How long did he stay with you?"

"Seven years."

Frank had to do a double take to make sure he didn't hear it wrong, but no, he didn't. Seven years

was a crazy long amount of time, a period Frank had never managed to hold a relationship for and couldn't even imagine ever being able to. His longest one had lasted for three years, and even that had been a stretch, mainly because neither of them had known how to breach the subject of breaking up and moving out. Seven years seemed insane, and he flinched when Gerard moved on the bench next to him, head turning to look at him fully. He said nothing for a long time, just gazing at him, and Frank felt his insides liquifying from the intensity of it.

"Seven years," he repeated slowly just to give Gerard something to latch on to and continue. "That's a long fucking time."

"It is," came the reply, and Frank couldn't shake off the relief at hearing Gerard's voice again.

"You must have really loved each other."

"I think so," Gerard shrugged non-committedly. "I know I loved him. Loving Bert came easily, and it hardly took any time for me to realize that I did. A few months, at best, but I was in love with him from the second he smiled at me in that dressing room. Whether *he* loved *me*, though, well… that's a different story."

"He must have," Frank protested, finding it hard to explain why he was trying to prove it. "Seven years, Gerard. He wouldn't have stayed with you for that long if he didn't love you."

"He loved parts of me for sure," Gerard hummed. "Like my apartment, the food I put on the table, the money that came after my performances got more controversial. I remember how he encouraged me; at the time, I felt empowered by it. It meant so much to believe a guy I loved wanted me to extend the boundaries and do whatever I wanted to do."

"Extend how?"

"Bert had ideas. He wasn't only a music genius – and he was that for sure – but he was also ingenious when it came to my dancing. Now I know he probably did some solid calculations, and that's why he wanted me to do it. Get off the stage, he kept saying, get close to the guys. Sit in their lap, stop hiding beneath the bathrobe, let them touch you. It was his idea, too, that I should do private shows for more money."

Frank swallowed hard, a gnawing uneasy feeling filling him to the brim. "Private how?"

"One on one," Gerard winced, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "It was hardly stripteasing at that point. It was… are you recording this?" Gerard's head snapped up for a moment, eyes wide. Frank nodded, confirming, and Gerard's frown became more profound as he tried to choose the right words.

"I won't quote you word for word," he promised after a moment. "Say whatever feels right, and I can edit it out later. You can help out with that, even, if you want."

Frank could pinpoint the exact moment when Gerard decided to put his entire trust in him. In any other circumstances, it would make him feel good, but it was terrifying, instead, when Gerard's eyes turned vulnerably honest.

"Bert did a lot of drugs," his voice was barely above a whisper. "And I got hooked on them too, really fast. It started slow, with alcohol at first, but it messed with my performances. Noah was pissed off and threatened to fire me if I kept showing up wobbling on my feet, so I came home in tears and told Bert I had to stop drinking. Frank, if you knew how fucked up I was back then… it wasn't pretty. Nothing of it was pretty, but Bert held me through it and kept saying that he had

something better, that he knew a way to make me feel good. I wanted to believe him."

"Did you?"

"Sure I did, and of course, the motherfucker was right. It all went downhill from there. Pills at first, then snorting whatever he put in front of me, then shooting up. I was fucking ecstatic. I felt like I had more clarity than ever without the side effects of the booze. I was energetic, confident, fucking *thrilled* to jump on stage. Noah must have known something was going on, but he stayed quiet about it because, truth be told, I was earning him a fortune. He kept patting my back and laughing, saying I was a crazy fucker, and then he sent me out there over and over again. Hell, no other performer did what I did. I was the only one brave enough – or drugged enough, if you will – to pick up people from the audience and drag them on stage. I jerked someone off once, I think, but I can't be sure. I barely remembered any of it afterward."

Frank instinctively reached over to wrap a hand around Gerard's wrist. He expected him to recoil and pull away, but Gerard's gaze fell on Frank's fingers circled around his skin, and the only thing he did was sigh. He didn't try to dislodge it, maybe understanding that Frank was lost for words or maybe appreciating what little comfort he was offering. He shifted his coffee cup to his other hand and turned his hand palm up, grabbing Frank's hand fully.

"The private shows were exactly that," he continued in a tight voice. "Bert encouraged me for months. He said he wouldn't mind, that it would make me famous. He spewed bullshit about how these things were happening in Europe all the time, how he worked with someone from there who told him about it. When I tried to protest, he kissed me, held me, and pressed a needle to my arm, and it was usually enough to shut me up. Eventually, I agreed. Whatever it was he was buying cost a lot, and we were starting to feel the lack of money in the house. I remember he asked me if I wanted him to starve to death the way his parents have wanted, and I couldn't say yes. I loved him so much I would do anything to make him happy."

"When you said the private shows weren't stripteasing," Frank said slowly, weighing every word. "Does it mean—"

"Nothing too extreme," Gerard shook his head. "No one's ever fucked me if that's what you're thinking, but I got as close to it as possible. I had a separate room at *Labyrinth*, and I made damn sure it was used as often as it could. I danced for rich men the same way I would on stage, but I didn't stop where I would have stopped before. There were a lot of handjobs, even more blowjobs, or someone rubbing one off on my ass through their pants."

"Jesus, Gerard."

"I know," Gerard heaved a sigh, throwing his head back. "The worst part was that I liked it. All these men were giving me attention, I was turning them on, and it filled my pockets with so much cash you wouldn't believe it. It was like college all over again, only this time, I got paid for it."

"And Bert allowed it? He wasn't jealous?"

"Oh, no, he loved it," Gerard's smile was sad as he looked over at Frank. "He found a pet name for me, even. Kept calling me his little whore."

"Gross."

"It was, but he had no reason to complain. I didn't make us rich, but it was a close thing. It was the most money he had ever seen, and the limitations didn't exist anymore. He bought better drugs, stronger drugs. None of us knew how to function anymore unless we were high."

Frank squeezed around Gerard's fingers, gazing down at their joined hands. He couldn't imagine it – this Gerard, so free and beautiful, so *sober*, being so messed up he let someone strip him of his dignity. Ever since he met Gerard, he had seen nothing but strength in him; it was hard to comprehend it hadn't always been like this.

Gerard squeezed back in encouragement, and Frank shuddered as he let his head clear. What Gerard was describing had happened years ago, and it was apparent he was much better now. Still, Frank didn't let go of his fingers and only held tighter, afraid the reality would shift, and Gerard would suddenly disappear.

"So what happened?" he found himself asking. "I mean… you're okay now, aren't you?"

"More or less," Gerard smiled. "You never stop being an alcoholic or a drug addict, not really, but I have things under control now. It's been years since I relapsed last."

"But you did relapse?"

"A few times. This," Gerard pointed at the headstone in front of them. "I thought it was Bert's idea. He made it sound so romantic, too. One night, I found him in our bed when I came home from the club. It has been a bad fucking night, too. The guy I had been performing for had been rough, he hadn't settled for my usual show. He had paid me a lot for it, too, so I had let him do whatever he'd wanted, but everything hurt when I stumbled home that night. My throat, my skull, my jaw… you name it. All I wanted was to cuddle with Bert and let him take the pain away."

"What happened?"

"Bert was out of it," Gerard hummed, deep in thoughts. "He knew I was there, obviously, but he acted like he was deaf when I was begging him not to touch me. I don't know what he took that night, but it was something different. It was like I couldn't stop him no matter how hard I tried," Gerard winced again and Frank's stomach, already twisted into a knot, dropped to the ground.

"Did he—"

"I didn't think so then. I mean, times were different. No one would dream about calling something a rape if it happened in a consensual relationship, right? Today I'd call it that, but the name of it hardly matters, so I'll call it what I've always called it – he fucked me. He wasn't gentle or careful, and despite the pain, I still didn't try to push him off. I remember thinking it was the only way he knew how to show affection."

"Please," Frank whispered. "Don't try to justify it."

"I'm not, though. Everything Bert did, I interpreted as his love for me. He wanted to fuck me, so he did, and I let him. He stuck a needle in my arm and shot me up with whatever it was he had, and I let him do that, too. He kept talking to me," Gerard's voice was wavering now, and it turned bitter and lower as he imitated Bert's words. "I love you. We'll die together, I'm going to watch over you, and then I'll follow. Please don't be scared, we'll have eternity together. I had a grave made for us. We'll be together forever, just let me do it, let me, let me, let me."

"For fuck's sake, Gee."

"But he lied," Gerard's teeth gritted together in anger. "He was already so fucked up when I came home. He didn't measure any of this shit, he just kept pulling it into the syringes and injecting us both, over and over, but he already had more of it in his system. I should have known he'd be out before me."

Frank's hands were almost frantic as he put the coffee to the side and pulled at Gerard's arm. He let him do that, too, watching with mild interest as Frank grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and pulled. He wasn't ashamed of it, at least, and he helped with shrugging his coat off and rolling the sleeve of his shirt as Frank inspected the skin he found on his bare forearms. He had never paid attention, not as much as he was now, but with the additional knowledge, the scars were easy to discern. Tiny specks of paler, almost white skin around the veins in the crook of his elbow, faded over the years, but still there. His head snapped up as his hand closed over them, and he found Gerard smiling gently at him.

"It's okay," he said quietly. "I'm okay."

"Are you?"

"Now I am."

"But he tried to kill you!"

"And he didn't succeed," Gerard's gaze turned serious. "All he accomplished was killing himself. Have you ever seen someone overdose, Frank? In a movie, for example?"

"I think so."

"Well, it's nothing like in the movies. It's fucking ugly, Frank. It was ugly enough to wake me up from the haze and call the ambulance, but they were too late. They told me that, days later, after they'd managed to get me clean in the hospital and I had more or less came back to myself. They told me it was a close call even for me. Bert had been dead for hours when they arrived."

"But you said… how long did you wait before you called?"

"Not long. See, I know we had sex that night, the hospital said so. They ran tests and said they were scared shitless that the results would come positive for AIDS. They saw me as a gay drug addict. Who the fuck knows where the needles Bert used came from or where he stuck his dick when I wasn't home," Gerard shook his head again in resignation. "But, miraculously, I was clean. The rest of it, however – the headstone talk, the promise of the afterlife, never happened. They told me it was impossible. Bert had a heart attack during the intercourse, and he was dead in minutes. Everything I heard him say was only in my head."

"But he shot you up."

"I shot myself up. I don't remember it like that, but that's what must have happened. I begged them to check multiple times, but they kept coming back with the same answer. The three or so hours I thought I spent with him, I spent lying next to his dead body," Gerard laughed bitterly and then sighed, lowering his gaze to Frank's fingers around his wrist. "I had this headstone made. Now I know I'll never be buried here with him, I don't *want* to be, but back then, it seemed like a good idea. Whether it was just my imagination or not, I thought that was what he would have wanted."

Frank pulled his hand away and hid his face in his palms. He didn't have to tell Gerard to stop talking. It was apparent he needed a break like he needed air, but even in the silence that followed, he still felt rickety. His hands were shaking, he noticed, and his stomach clenched painfully when he tried to understand the story he was hearing. When he first went for the interview with Gerard, he had known it would make for a good biography, but now he wished he would have backed out at the very start. This had nothing to do with a glorious performer anymore. There were no flimsy scarves being thrown from the stage and no alluring smiles. Somehow, what had begun as a story about a stripper with a baggage of experience in the field, ended up being a tale about the despair

of human life.

It wasn't something Frank wanted to write. He still would because, as horrible as it all sounded, he knew it would sell like hotcakes, but he wasn't sure if he was ready to hear Gerard say more about any of it. If it was anyone else, then maybe, but he had respect for Gerard he hadn't felt in a while. He liked him, pure and simple, and the pain in Gerard's voice almost transcended the words and became a physical pain instead. Frank didn't want to suffer. He didn't want any of them to suffer.

A heavy and insistent arm draped over his shoulders, and Frank looked up. He had an idea how he looked – lost, confused, scared – and Gerard's smile turned soft as he reached to ruffle his hair.

"Hey," he said quietly. "It all happened years ago, Frank. You really need to listen to me, I promise I'm okay now."

What was there to say to that? All Frank wanted to do was lean against Gerard and feel the warmth of his body, to press so close to him no one would be able to separate them. He sighed and wriggled out of Gerard's touch, careful not to give him a wrong idea, and stood up on wobbly legs.

"Okay," he nodded slowly. "I'm sorry, this is… a lot to take in."

"I know but trust me, I'm good now."

Frank wanted to trust him. Somehow he had a feeling the rest of the story Gerard had for him wasn't going to get much better, but he wanted to bring this thing to an end. They were running out of time, only a few days left before Frank had to submit the biography draft and maybe another week for any corrections to be made, but he couldn't force himself to ask more questions. Things were too heavy and overwhelming now, and Frank just wanted to feel like a person again.

He looked up at the sky and then down at his watch. It was only eleven in the morning, Gerard's show at *House* hours away.

"You want to grab lunch together?" he found himself asking when Gerard stood up as well, his arm looser but still present around Frank's shoulder. "I need to process everything before moving on with your story, but we can still hang out."

"Let's leave the rest of the story for tomorrow," Gerard suggested as he pulled Frank closer. "And for now, let's just eat and drink coffee. Life is too short to dwell on the negativity all the time, anyway."

*

They ended up having pizza in Frank's apartment again after Frank found himself unable to face people in public places. He had felt like he had been strung too tight, every sudden noise or gesture making him flinch, and he had gladly accepted Gerard's offer to just order takeout and watch another one of Frank's multiple VHS horror movies. They hadn't breached the topic of Gerard's past, not once, and Frank was content with focusing his attention on the movie playing on screen and pretending he wasn't going through an existential crisis. Gerard noticed, of course. It was no secret Frank was still processing what had been said, even as the Cannibal Holocaust had picked up the pace of the plot, and Frank was grateful there were no words uttered between them. When Gerard took his hand and held it tightly, Frank didn't comment on it, and he still didn't say anything when Gerard slid down the couch and rested his head in Frank's lap. It was strangely

comfortable, despite his body going taut at first, and he played idly with Gerard's hair as the movie went on.

He didn't know what they were. Now more than ever, Frank believed something had shifted between them, some invisible barrier getting demolished, leaving them both open and vulnerable. He didn't even read too much into the fact that Gerard was splayed on his couch, hidden under his blanket and cuddling to his side. It wasn't going to lead to anything, he knew that much, and that was alright, too. It was simply a comfort thing, even if he didn't know who needed more of it. Gerard had torn his heart out and had handed it over to Frank, but Frank felt like it was him who was bleeding out onto the ground.

He simply didn't understand. If he was Bert, if he had Gerard love him so strongly, so unconditionally, he would do anything in his power not to fuck it up. He couldn't comprehend how Bert had gone so wrong about it from the very start.

It was only partially surprising when he blinked and found the hours gone as if by magic. The early afternoon they saw through the windows as they settled onto the couch had turned into an early evening, the sky dark and the street lights glowing from below. During the time Frank had been asleep, the TV had turned off on itself, and as he glanced up from his place on the couch, he noticed the player had ejected the VHS tape and turned itself off, too. He panicked for a split second, his stomach swooping as he feared they were running late, but upon craning his neck back over the couch's armrest, the kitchen clock informed him it was only six in the evening.

They weren't running late. Frank turned his head, rolling back into his previous position on his side, and came face to face with Gerard.

He looked peaceful when he slept. The wrinkles around his eyes had smoothed out, his lips not curled into a grimace of pain or disdain but pliant, instead, and parted softly as he breathed evenly in and out. The bangs had fallen over his eyes, and Frank reached out slowly to brush them away, uncovering Gerard's surprisingly long eyelashes. He watched for a moment how his eyes moved beneath the skin, whatever dream he was having affecting him slightly. He had known Gerard was beautiful since he'd first seen him, but this was better. This wasn't a performer playing a character, it wasn't even a public figure exposing his life story to a journalist. This was just a man who had chosen to fall asleep in Frank's arms, and it felt like a solid grip around Frank's throat when he realized the levels of trust Gerard had to have to let go like that.

In the past, he had fallen asleep beside a corpse and didn't know it. Now he was sleeping next to Frank like there was absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Frank slid his hand gently to Gerard's arm and squeezed. They were pressed together as close as they could, legs tangled under the blanket and Gerard's hand resting on Frank's waist, but there were still boundaries he wasn't ready to cross. Especially not after learning what he now knew and not with Gerard. The touch he settled on was purely platonic, just the brush of his fingers over the fabric of Gerard's wrinkled shirt, and it didn't elicit the emotions Frank had felt after he got lost in thoughts while watching Gerard's video. He wanted Gerard to feel safe more than anything. From the start, it had been his main priority.

Gerard's eyelids fluttered. He blinked a couple of times, confused, before his gaze sharpened as it fell on Frank's face.

"Hey," Frank whispered, sliding his hand down Gerard's forearm. The fingers he felt on his hip tightened when Gerard moved an inch closer instead of withdrawing. "Rise and shine."

"Mm," Gerard hummed, apparently unbothered to find himself wrapped tightly around Frank.

“What time is it?”

“Just six, don’t worry. You still have three hours before your show starts.”

“How long does it usually take you to get to my club?”

“On a bad day?” Frank made sure and then laughed when the nodding made Gerard’s hair fall right back into his eyes. “About half an hour, give or take. Maybe forty minutes.”

“And it’s six?”

Frank craned his neck again. “Seven minutes past.”

“Awesome.”

Anything he could expect, from Gerard stretching his body out or throwing his legs over the edge of the couch, didn’t happen. Instead, Gerard rolled closer still, using the hand on Frank’s hip to press them firmly together, and rested his forehead in the center of Frank’s chest. He waited patiently for a few seconds, and when Frank still didn’t move, too stunned to do anything, he exhaled dramatically and reached to clasp a hand around Frank’s wrist.

“Gerard?”

“Tell me if I’m reading it wrong,” Gerard asked softly as he shifted Frank’s fingers from where they had rested around his forearm to the small of his back. “But if I’m not, then you can touch me. It’s okay.”

“Reading what?” Frank asked, his throat tightening in anticipation. If Gerard said the right words, if he leaned in closer, then Frank would have his confirmation. He could use the leverage he had to flip them over, to sink between Gerard’s thighs, to tilt his head back and kiss him. He could promise him things Bert should have promised him long ago and failed by lying through his teeth. “What conclusions are you drawing here?”

“We’re friends, aren’t we?”

That hurt. It hurt in ways Frank had never seen coming, even if he probably should have. They didn’t know each other. Or, well, Frank knew a lot about Gerard, but Gerard barely grazed the surface of Frank’s life, and not enough time had passed for this to be anything other than friendship.

But then again, it really could, couldn’t it? Didn’t Gerard say it himself how he had known he’d been in love with Bert from the moment he had laid his eyes on him? If it was meant to be for them, wouldn’t he know already Frank was what he wanted? Frank sure as hell knew that Gerard was precisely that for him, but the coldness he suddenly felt in his bones made his body rigid. He had set his expectations too high. Friendship was already more than he should have gotten from Gerard, and he would be okay with it as soon as he managed to get over his little crush.

Not so little, maybe, but he didn’t dwell on it. He pressed his hand to Gerard’s back and pulled him in because, after all, he was a good friend. Always had been, always would be. If this was all Gerard wanted from him, Frank was going to give him everything he could.

*

He went with Gerard to the club nonetheless. Staying at home was not an option when Gerard had so excitedly told him about a new routine he wanted to try tonight, and despite the bitter taste his friendship declaration left in Frank's mouth, he still wanted to see him dance. He pushed the doubts to the back of his mind and simply laughed when Gerard rummaged through his wardrobe to find a replacement for his crumbled shirt, complaining that Frank owned nothing but plain t-shirts and flannels. He had none of the previous reservations about shedding his clothes, either, unbuttoning his shirt and throwing it carelessly on top of Frank's bed as he began to change into a plain black t-shirt. Frank allowed himself a second of weakness. He knew he would see more of Gerard's skin if he kept coming to watch his performances, but the chances of ever seeing Gerard half-naked in his bedroom again were significantly lower.

They split the taxi cost and were quiet on the way to the club, Gerard playing with Frank's fingers almost unconsciously. If Frank didn't know better, he'd say he was nervous, and so he stretched his arm on top of Gerard's lap and let his short nails dig into his skin.

"Did you bring your camera?" Gerard asked him when they were nearing the club, his hold on Frank's skin tightening slightly. Frank didn't look over at him, gazing out the taxi window, but he smiled and lifted his bag slightly. "Good. I'll give you a few chances to take good photos tonight. There are a few parts to the choreography where I'm not supposed to move much."

"Oh yeah?"

"It's not what you think," Frank could hear a grin in Gerard's voice. "It's actually the exact opposite. I wanted to do this show for a while, just never really had a reason to."

"Why tonight, then?"

"Because of where my story goes from here," Gerard hummed quietly. "I know you've been shaken up after the last bit, but unfortunately, it gets even darker now. The heartbreak I felt, the choices I've made because of my grief… they were ugly, Frank. Really fucking ugly."

"What choices?" Frank asked, finally turning to steal a glance at Gerard. "I remember your list. You had *new perspectives* written after the heartbreak part. Isn't that a good thing?"

"It can be," Gerard was already looking at him, too. "But remember *little whore*?"

Frank's breath left him in a hurry. "No, Gee, don't tell me—"

"Would you prefer if I lied?"

No, he wouldn't. He gripped Gerard's hand tighter and accepted his fate of getting an emotional whiplash from Gerard's story again.

"No. How the fuck did that happen, though?"

"Progressively. There was not enough money, and then there was a guy named Markus, and an offer was made, and then everything happened really fast," Gerard sent him a calming smile, his thumb brushing the side of Frank's hand. "Later, though, alright? I want to focus on what makes me happy now."

Frank didn't want to let him go. He felt frozen in place as Gerard jumped out of the taxi a few seconds after it stopped in front of the club and followed him with his eyes, oblivious to how the cabman was staring at him intensively. At moments like this, he forgot he was only there to do his

job. The friendship that had blossomed between them, or the absolutely ridiculous notion of love Frank felt swimming through his veins, blinded him to the real goal he had to accomplish. He suddenly realized that he hadn't even spoken to Travis since he had borrowed his shirt, which felt like a lifetime ago. He had no idea how much progress he had made with his article or if it was even still happening. He made a mental note to call him in the morning, promising himself he wouldn't abandon one friendship in favor of another, and then cringed when a loud thud sounded through the cab.

He didn't remember the name at first. The face looked familiar – young and bright, a cheeky smile right in front of Frank's face as the guy leaned into the taxi, but the sight of his tattooed arms brought the memories back.

"You coming?" Jake asked, grinning at Frank like he was the funniest joke in the room. "Your boyfriend's already inside."

"He isn't my boyfriend," Frank grunted, finally finding enough clarity to move and exit the taxi. It sprinted away almost immediately after he shut the door, the cabbie probably swearing at him for wasting his precious time. He was met with Jake's extended arm and regarded him carefully before sliding his hand under the crook of his elbow. "What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you, obviously," Jake's eyebrows raised comically. "You're a hard man to get a hold of, mister Iero."

"I don't remember telling you my last name."

"But you've made quite a name for yourself. It really isn't that hard to look you up online when one knows what they're looking for."

"And what could you possibly want from me?"

Jake's smile was surprisingly kind as he led Frank down the stairs to the club. At first, it didn't strike Frank as weird, not even when Jake led him away from the stage and into the back corridor leading to the dressing rooms. His heart jumped at first as he wondered if Gerard had maybe asked for him to come, but Jake bypassed the familiar door and led him further down the hall, opening the door to another room. This one was smaller than Gerard's, barely enough space for one man to turn around to dress and undress, but Frank went in like he was paid to do it. He didn't feel anxious, exactly, but the bitter feeling returned with twice the strength as Jake locked them both inside.

Gerard didn't want him. Frank could break his back in half to get his attention, to make him fall for him, but what mattered, in the end, was that Gerard was not interested. He wanted a friend, someone to hold hands with and spill his guts to, but he would never look at Frank how Jake was gazing at him at that moment, and he would never want him the way Frank wanted him. He swallowed hard and crossed his arms over his chest when Jake's smile turned wicked.

"If Gee isn't your boyfriend," he started slowly, looking down at his hand in a theatrical display of inspecting his nails. "Then what is he?"

"Do you need to ask?"

"I'd like to get my bearings," Jake grinned wider. "Establish some facts, so I don't embarrass myself here."

"We work together," Frank offered. "And I consider him a friend."

“Work together on what?”

“You looked me up, you figure it out.”

Jake cocked his head to the side, and this time, Frank had to return the smile. He couldn’t imagine this guy would do him harm, and he was pretty adorable when he tried to stifle his giggling by biting his lip or lowering his head. He didn’t have the charm Gerard possessed, not even close, but Frank would be lying if he said he didn’t find him attractive. He was *highly* attractive – around thirty by the looks of it, with a toned body and multiple tattoos, his long legs in tight jeans making Frank’s mouth water just a little. He remembered how attracted he had been to him the first time he’d seen him and how bold Jake had been with his courtship. If Gerard hadn’t come to swoop him off his feet, he would have probably gone home with Jake that evening a few days ago.

“You’re a journalist, so I guess an interview would be a smart guess,” Jake tried slowly, encouraged by how Frank’s body relaxed. It told him he was right, too, and his face brightened in pride. “Oh, see, now I’m fascinated. Can you tell me more about it, or is it a big secret?”

“A huge one,” Frank replied easily, uncurling his arms. When Jake took a step forward, he let it happen, not looking down but still acutely aware of their feet touching with how close Jake now stood to him. “I can give you a teaser, though, if you’d like.”

“Mm, please do. I’ll be sure to pay handsomely for it.”

What was it that Gerard had said? He could guarantee Jake wouldn’t disappoint?

“It’s his life story,” Frank said slowly. “There is some talk about art school, his relationships, some heartbreaks.”

“And is the story done?”

“No, not even close,” Frank smiled.

“It’s not a teaser unless you tell me what happens next. What will you two talk about?”

Frank frowned, but Jake smiled so sweetly that he didn’t think twice about it before answering. “A guy named Markus.”

“Who’s Markus?”

“I don’t know yet,” Frank admitted. When Jake lifted his hands and settled them on his hips, Frank had only a second of doubt before he melted into the touch. “I guess I’ll find out tomorrow.”

“I’ll be the first to buy the story when it comes out,” Jake said honestly, an edge to his voice indicating an interest in something completely different than how Gerard’s life went down. His hands grew bolder, fingers slipping beneath Frank’s t-shirt so he could stroke the skin above his waistband, and Frank let out a shaky breath as he finally looked down. If he had any doubts about what was about to happen, they flew out the window immediately. The front of Jake’s skinny jeans was bulging, and he widened his stance to press himself closer. When he leaned in to brush his lips over the shell of Frank’s ear, Frank didn’t even try to stop him. “So, about that payment now.”

“I’m forty-one,” Frank laughed, leaning back against the wall to give Jake just enough room to work on his button and zipper. “You’ll have to work a little harder than smiling to get me going.”

“Oh, I intend to,” Jake sent him a shit-eating grin as he dropped to his knees, taking Frank’s pants and underwear with him as he went. Frank had a split moment to wonder what the hell he was

doing – he had a stranger kneeling in front of him in a stuffy, tiny dressing room of the club the guy he was falling in love with worked in, and he was half naked with his cock coming to life rapidly fast – and then Jake's hand wrapped around him and Frank's head knocked against the wall. "I gotta make it fast if you wanna make it on time to see Gee's show."

"Fuck," Frank groaned, mouth falling open. It had really been too damn long since he hooked up with anyone and his own hand just never felt the same. "Well, like I said—"

"I know what you said, but you have to hurry. Just pretend I'm him. I don't care."

That did it. Frank wasn't an asshole – he never did what Jake had just encouraged him to do and had always believed you'd have to be a proper dick to think about someone else while having sex, but he couldn't deny it worked. Jake's mouth was hot and tight as it closed around the head of his cock, his tongue pressing into the slit before he took him further down his throat, and all Frank could think of was Gerard. He imagined it was his hair he was fisting, his eyes glancing up at him, and his head bobbing up and down his length. He imagined he would be just as good at it as Jake was. There was no delicacy in it, just Frank's cock sliding in and out of Jake's mouth rapidly, and he gripped the back of his neck and swore loudly.

"Shut up," Jake panted when he withdrew, his hand still pumping him. "Unless you want him to hear? Do you want him to know I'm making you feel so good?"

"Holy shit, Jake—"

"That's it, let him hear you," Jake grinned wider, leaning back in. He buried his head between Frank's legs, mouthing and licking at his balls as he jerked him off, and a grunt of pleasure escaped him when Frank's hips bucked. "So good, too. He doesn't know what the fuck he's missing."

"Fuck, please, yeah," Frank moaned, the arousal spiking when Jake gripped him tighter. "Oh fuck, I'm gonna—"

Lips closed around the head again, and Jake sucked hard, tightening the hold around the base. Frank didn't have time to warn him – his orgasm took him almost by surprise and then rippled through him as he came down Jake's throat with a breathy moan that sounded surprisingly close to Gerard's name. He didn't know how long it took. He seemed to be coming and coming as Jake continued to suckle, hands relentless as they knitted his ass to bring his hips closer. Frank slumped hard against the wall when Jake finally let go, and he forced himself to open his eyes just in time to see the back of Jake's hand collecting a few droplets of come that had escaped his mouth.

His lips glistened as he smiled, leaning back on his feet. He made Frank watch then, unashamed and confident, as he pulled his own cock out and jerked himself off with just a few rough tugs. Frank wanted to help, he really did, but his legs felt like jelly and he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with the man he found himself with.

When the pleasure had taken over him, he had forgotten for a moment that it had not been Gerard. He could have sworn he caught a glimpse of the familiar smile wrapped around his cock.

"Well," Jake laughed as he scrambled back to his feet, lifting his wet hand up to his eyes and grinning. "I better go wash this off, I'm supposed to be on stage after Gee's done with his bit."

"Wait, wait—" Frank reached over to grab at his shoulder, almost stumbling over his own feet. Jake's eyebrows raised in question, and Frank swallowed his pride. "Do you wanna go home with me after I'm done here?"

“Sorry, dear,” Jake pouted, gently prying Frank’s hand away. “I don’t do romance.”

“Who said anything about romance,” Frank tried once more. Jake rolled his eyes at him, at how pathetic it was to ask twice after being rejected, but he couldn’t help it. He was grasping at straws here, begging to receive at least a portion of what he truly wanted. “Maybe I just want to fuck you properly?”

“You don’t want to fuck me. You want to fuck Gerard,” Jake’s smile fell, giving way to a stern look. “I’ll suck you off anytime, but my ass is off limits. I can give you some advice if you want to fuck, though.”

He did his pants up as he spoke, leaving Frank exposed and feeling like an idiot with his naked thighs still trembling as he was coming down from his high. He forced himself to bend down and gather himself together just as Jake leaned back into his space. There was something different about him now, something that gave Frank pause as he regarded him closely. It was almost like he knew something he wasn’t telling him, a secret of some sort, and not the one they would share from now on. It made Frank’s defenses rise, the smile he wore faltering and a grim face appearing instead, and he hoped he was shooting daggers Jake’s way as he buttoned his jeans up.

“Yeah?” he challenged him briefly. “Let’s hear it then, Casanova.”

Jake chuckled as he pressed a kiss to the side of Frank’s jaw.

“If you want to fuck someone,” he said. “You better find yourself a little whore.”

*

Gerard’s performance had been fantastic that night, but Frank hardly remembered any of it as he stumbled back into his apartment at almost midnight. He knew there had been absolutely no stripping involved – something the manager of *Labyrinth* would have probably complained about, seeing what he had allowed Gerard to do in the past, but what Brian, the manager of *House*, clearly approved of. Gerard hadn’t done anything on stage. He hadn’t undressed, he hadn’t lied down, he hadn’t been seductive. He had simply stood there and sung, and yet, even with his mind half gone, Frank knew it had been the best of his performances. His voice had carried through the room with a power Frank didn’t think was possible, and the words he had chosen to sing were painful and had hit in just the right places.

Gerard had sung about grief, loss, and love. He had sung about being an addict, a victim of abuse, a failure of a human being who had managed to rise from the ashes and start anew. Gerard had sung about himself, and when their eyes had met across the room, Frank had known where the choice had come from. That night when Frank had succumbed to his bodily desires and had come down Jake’s throat, Gerard had decided to serenade him.

He had been unable to stay in the club for long after that. Gerard had probably expected Frank to barge into his dressing room after the performance the way he had always done before – the way *friends* of the performers did – but Frank had packed his camera and fled the scene with a heavy heart and guilt so strong he had nearly choked on it. It never went away, either. As he walked into his flat almost an hour later, it was still present, rolling in his stomach and gnawing at his limbs as he threw himself down onto the couch where he and Gerard had cuddled not even twelve hours before.

He didn't know how Jake had known. There were a lot of questions that needed answers, and Frank had no way of getting any of them. He didn't think he had been bugged. He hadn't noticed any signs of someone breaking into his apartment, and he had combed his bag after realizing the words that Jake had uttered to him, but he'd found nothing. Maybe it was Gerard, then. Maybe Gerard had told Jake the same story he had told Frank, and that was how Jake had known about the offensive nickname. It seemed improbable, but Frank had a sinking feeling that maybe he knew nothing about Gerard – or himself, for that matter. Not really.

He wanted them to fit together, and then he had gone and fucked the first man who had taken any interest in him. Not only that, he had thought of Gerard as he'd done it. He had thought of the man who had been abused for the better part of seven years, who had been made into a drug addict, who had been *raped* by someone he had loved only to find his corpse hours later. Frank groaned, pressing his hands over his eyes hard enough to hurt. He had acted like a fucking moron, and he had nothing to justify it with. He could only hope Gerard hadn't actually heard them, or at least not the part when Frank had moaned his name so loud it felt like the walls of the dressing room had shaken with the strength of it.

If anything, he hoped at least he'd be allowed to finish the interview. He couldn't let Travis down, not after he had gone to Doug and begged him to agree to this stupid biography idea. If Gerard hated him, it would be justified, but Frank needed the rest of the story, even if it would be uttered in the most vicious voice.

Frank closed his eyes, rolling onto his side and hugging his knees to his chest. It didn't even feel like he was forty-one anymore. He felt like a child, curled on the couch in his mum's living room, lying through his teeth about the name and gender of the person he had his first crush on. All he wanted was for sleep to come and collect him. The next day would be easier, he told himself. The next day he was going to wake up to a text from Gerard with the location of their next meeting. He was going to get there, speed things up to get the remaining story out of Gerard, and then it would be over. He'd never set foot in *House* again, and Gerard would never come to his place again. Hell, Frank was sure they were never going to see each other in passing, either. New York was massive, after all. What were the chances he would come face to face with him again?

A soft knock on the door chased the sleep away. Frank startled, lifting his head and squinting as he tried to see in the darkness of his flat, and he was sure he had imagined it. After all, he had not given Jake his address, but Gerard knew where he lived. He could have given it to him, even if Frank didn't think he would. He glued his eyes to the doorknob and waited a few seconds in the complete silence of the night. Then, the knocking came again.

Frank was on his feet immediately and nearly flew through the living room. No one knew where he lived but Gerard, and if Gerard was there, on the other side of the solid wood, so close to him, then it had to mean he came to—

He pulled the door open, and Gerard all but fell into his arms.

"Oh fuck," Frank grunted, the sudden weight crashing onto his chest sending him stumbling a few feet back. His arms slipped beneath Gerard's armpits on instinct, but it did nothing to reduce the impact. He clipped his elbow on the harsh edge of the wall and hissed as Gerard's legs wobbled and lost their bearing completely. "Jesus fucking Christ, what—"

He had to be drunk. Frank grunted, adjusting his hold on Gerard and dragging him away from the door, not bothering with locking up and counting it a success that he'd managed to even kick it close. He couldn't see Gerard's face, currently pressed to his collarbone, but he heard his rapid breathing and saw how his feet slid over the floor as he tried to gather himself back up. Frank

wanted to get angry at him then, let go of him and let him tumble onto the ground, but hands were grabbing the back of his shirt almost frantically, and all he could do was deposit Gerard heavily onto the couch.

That's when he saw more. Even in the dim light the lamp he turned on provided, the signs were obvious, and Frank was on his knees by the couch so fast they cracked loudly in protest.

"Hey," he mumbled, pressing a delicate hand to Gerard's chin to lift it.

"*Ugh*," was the only thing Gerard supplied. He tried to roll over, weak hand grasping the front of Frank's t-shirt, but Frank shrugged it off quickly.

"No, no, don't move. I'm calling the ambulance."

He was beaten up pretty badly. The blood around his mouth and nose had dried out already, but there must have been a lot of it, to begin with, because the red lines ran down Gerard's face down to his neck. His lip was swollen, and an angry purple bruise blossomed high on his left cheek. The black eye had begun to form, too, coloring the delicate skin up to his eyebrow. He was breathing and grunting, which Frank assumed was a good sign – at least he wasn't unconscious – but his stomach dropped at the notion of all the injuries he couldn't see. There could be broken bones beneath Gerard's skin. There could be burst tissues, internal bleeding, concussions.

"No," Gerard whispered with urgency. When he reached for Frank again, Frank let him. He pressed himself closer to Gerard and grasped his extended hand, putting it back on Gerard's stomach. "No ambulance."

"What the fuck do you mean, no ambulance? Have you fucking seen yourself? What happened?!"

Gerard's good eye opened, staring at Frank for a moment as if he couldn't believe he was there himself. He licked his lips then and winced, but most of all, he looked scared. "Lock the door."

There was no other explanation, no answers, but Frank scrambled to his feet and almost ran to the door. Whatever was going on, the panic was beginning to settle in his chest, making his heart speed up and his blood drum in his ears. Gerard was scared. Someone had beaten Gerard up, and now he was scared to the point of refusing medical help and begging Frank to lock them inside. If circumstances were different, Frank would maybe feel honored. He came to *him*, after all. Frank lived far away from where most of Gerard's life was happening, be it his apartment, the club, or the restaurants and cafes he sometimes frequented, but he still came here. How, Frank had no idea. No taxi would take him in such a state, mistaking him for a drunk, and walking would take… God, it would take so long. Over an hour for sure, but as Frank glanced at the clock after locking the door – even the old-fashioned chain he never used, just in case – it showed him it was one in the morning. With Gerard's performance ending a little after ten, it was plausible he left the club at eleven and then got jumped right after. Jesus. He had been like this for at least two hours already.

When he returned to the couch with a wet towel in hand, Gerard finally managed to roll onto his side and gazed at the ground, defeated. He curled himself into a ball the same way Frank had before he came over, and his hands were shaking as he tried to lift himself to look at Frank when he kneeled next to him again.

"Let me," Frank batted his hands away. "It's going to hurt a little, but I need to do that. Scrubbing dried blood would be more painful later."

Gerard didn't look convinced, but he didn't stop him when Frank began patting his injuries. "Ow, motherfucker—"

“I know. Just a few more, stay still. Fuck, I still think we should be calling the ambulance.”

“No ambulance,” Gerard repeated stubbornly.

“I got that the first time, but why? For all I know, your ribs could be broken. Do you *want* to have a punctured lung?”

“They aren’t broken.”

Frank had perhaps preferred Gerard when all he had been capable of was mumbling nonsense. He sighed, defeated, throwing the now bloody towel on the coffee table. He could ignore Gerard’s whining and call the ambulance anyway, but Gerard was regaining composure fast, and his moves didn’t seem so laggy anymore. Frank had been in a fair share of fights when he was a teenager, and usually, twelve to fifteen hours of sleep had been enough to mend his broken body. A proper sleep, though, not lying on the couch in the living room. He sighed again, trying to measure his chances of carrying Gerard all the way down to his bedroom. They were slim, to say the least. Gerard was in no way a big guy, but Frank was not exactly athletic, either.

“Okay,” he said slowly, running a hand up his hair. “Okay, I’m gonna need you to stand up once more. Do you think you can?”

Gerard laughed, or so Frank thought, the sound coming out raspy and choked off. “I’m not a fucking invalid, Frank.”

“No, you just fell through my door,” Frank hissed back at him. Assuming the curl of Gerard’s mouth was not the swelling spreading through his face, he was smiling at him. “Right, we’re going. Wrap your arm around my neck.”

The hold hurt just a little. Probably nothing compared to how Gerard felt, but Frank still gasped when a hand closed around the back of his neck, and the nails dug in. Gerard wasn’t as heavy as he remembered as he had crashed into him the first time, but there was still some weight to support as Frank carefully helped him onto his feet. There was more control over his steps now, even if they were still pretty shaky, and Frank supported him more than carried him down the hall to his bedroom. He felt Gerard’s surprised gaze on him as he flipped the light switch and ignored it the best he could, setting him on the edge of the mattress.

“I can’t take your bed,” Gerard’s voice was strained as he looked down at his own body. He was still wearing one of Frank’s t-shirts he had borrowed before, now covered in specks of hardened wetness that Frank had to assume was blood. “I— I’m sorry, Frank, I don’t know why I came here, I—”

“Shut up,” Frank interjected. It efficiently stopped the string of words coming from Gerard’s mouth, so he glanced up and smiled at him in reassurance. “Not, like, in general. Instead of apologizing, you could tell me what the fuck happened to you. Arms, up.”

He expected Gerard to recoil, but he looked as tired as Frank felt, so he lifted his arms in the air and let Frank pull his jacket down and then peel the shirt off. The sight was worse than Frank had expected, and he scowled, taking in the damage. The bruises spread far and wide across Gerard’s chest and sides, his usually pale complexion now discolored in so many places Frank wouldn’t be able to tell where one bruise ended and another began. Gerard was still staring at him from behind his bangs when Frank touched his side, right above the ribs where what looked like an imprint of a shoe was, and he hissed through his teeth.

“They’re not broken,” he repeated before Frank could ask. “I’ve broken my ribs before. This ain’t

it."

Frank gently turned him to inspect his back next, but this, at last, seemed untouched. Eliminating the possibility of kidney contusion, he leaned back and sat on his feet. "Whatever you say. Lie down."

"I'll have to report it," Gerard mumbled, lying down. "I just… I don't know anything. I know *who* did it, but I have no proof. Maybe it would be better to leave it alone."

"Who? Hips, up."

Frank rolled Gerard's pants down as carefully as he could. They were tight, the way Gerard liked all his jeans to be, and they took a significantly longer time to remove without hurting him in the process. There was a blooming bruise on Gerard's right hip and a lot of abrasions on his knees and calves, some of them still bleeding. He grounded Gerard with a stern look and made a beeline for another wet towel and the antiseptic he kept in his kitchen. Gerard hissed again when Frank pressed the alcohol to his wounds, but at least he didn't try to wriggle away from him.

"There were a couple of them," he admitted, eyes glued to the ceiling as Frank pressed his palm carefully over his groin. He didn't buck his hips and didn't try to recoil, didn't even as much as wince, so Frank crossed a few other injuries off the list. He was no doctor, but he figured things were most likely alright if someone wasn't groaning in pain. "Three or four, I don't know."

"Who were they?"

"No idea," Gerard shrugged the best he could just as Frank moved his hands to his left ankle. This one looked alright, too, but the right one was way bigger than it should be, and Gerard's foot twitched in his hold as he pressed against it. Probably sprained then. Frank made a mental note to get him some ointment for it in the morning and grabbed Gerard's calves to help get his legs on the bed. "I knew one of them. Never thought I'd see this asshole show up in person. God, I didn't think I'd see him again in general."

"What asshole? Jesus, Gerard, you better start talking, or I swear—"

"Markus."

"Oh."

Frank's head snapped up. What had previously felt like a hint of nausea was now growing to an unmanageable size, swimming through his stomach and up to his chest. The memories came crashing down again, and he knew he had to be squeezing Gerard's legs too tightly, knew it had to be painful around the cuts, but he couldn't let go.

This motherfucker. This goddamn tattooed motherfucker.

"I don't know what to do with it now," Gerard continued talking, looking unfazed. "If the biography comes out, he'll get even more pissed off. I don't even know how he found out in the first place. Someone must have seen you with me or heard us talking and connected the dots. I don't… but it doesn't matter. My point is, I guess I'll have to swallow my pride and visit the NYPD. If this is what he does as a warning, then I don't want to know what happens when he's out for revenge."

Frank's stomach wasn't going to survive. He was absolutely going to puke.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, pulling his comforter over Gerard's body with a trembling hand. He

looked down at it, his fingers curled around the fabric, and couldn't believe it belonged to him. He couldn't believe he was so naïve, so fucking *stupid*.

"Not your fault."

"Fuck, but it is," Frank groaned, hiding his face in his hands. He couldn't face Gerard. "I didn't know, I swear. It was an innocent question, and he looked genuinely curious. I didn't think… oh fuck, Gerard, I'm so sorry."

"What are you talking about?"

"Jake."

It had to be him. It all made perfect sense now – how he had been waiting for Frank to get out of the taxi, how he had wanted to establish the relationship between Frank and Gerard, how he had beamed when he had heard Frank utter the name Markus. How he had known about the little whore nickname. Of course, Gerard hadn't told Jake about it, he wouldn't have done that, but he had probably told whoever this Markus character was. Frank didn't know how much Jake earned in *House*, but it had to be less than what Gerard was getting every night. Markus, the asshole, had probably paid him handsomely for finding out what Gerard had been up to.

Paid handsomely. Frank's stomach churned, and he gagged audibly, earning himself a raise of Gerard's eyebrows.

"Frank," he said slowly. It was fucked up how he was beaten up and bloody, but it was still him doing the comforting part. "Whatever happened, it's not your fault."

"You don't understand," Frank shook his head. "He asked me about the interview. He… well, he looked interested, and I didn't tell him anything important. I just hinted, but I did tell him that a dude named Markus was in your story, and… fuck. *Fuck*."

"Frank—"

"He knew about the nickname," Frank's head snapped up again so he could look Gerard in the eyes. He expected to find anger there, disappointment, or at least some sort of confusion. Maybe pity. Gerard was gazing up at him calmly, though, and it almost looked like he was ready to smile again. "The *little whore* one. After he… he told me."

"After he, what?"

"I'm not saying it out loud."

"It's okay."

"No, it fucking isn't."

And it truly wasn't because no matter how Frank wanted to look at it, he not only felt like he had caused Gerard's injuries. He also felt betrayed, manipulated, and used, making him feel sick. He didn't think he would ever be able to go to *House* again. Maybe once, so he could find Jake and tear his head off, or at least punch him enough times for him to understand precisely what happened when you messed with Frank's friends. He was physically vibrating with it, and Gerard had to reach over and grip his bicep to make him remember his priorities. He couldn't storm off now. He didn't know where Jake lived, and even if he did, he couldn't leave Gerard alone.

What if he was wrong? What if the ribs were broken, and he would suffocate from a punctured

lung in the middle of the night? What if it was going to be Frank this time waking up next to a corpse?

It was maybe a safety hazard to lie down next to Gerard, but Frank didn't think he would fall asleep. He was too filled with adrenaline and fear to sleep, so the danger of rolling on top of Gerard at night and accidentally hurting him even more was slim. Gerard didn't seem to mind, splayed on his back with his face towards the ceiling, and he only turned onto his side with a quiet moan of pain when Frank turned the lights off and crawled on top of the mattress with him. He didn't dare to slip beneath the covers next to him. A blanket would have to suffice, and Frank was definitely going to go and get it - as soon as he confirmed Gerard was asleep.

He threw a cautious look over his shoulder. He was closer to the door, too. He was on the front line of fire if anyone was to come. Fuck if he knew what he was going to do should someone break in to attack them because it wasn't like Frank could take down four grown-up men, but at least he'd be there. At least this way, he could fight against the remorse he was feeling.

The touch of Gerard's hand on top of his made him jump. In the bedroom's darkness, it was impossible to see the look on Gerard's face, but Frank heard a smile in his voice when he spoke next.

"If you want to blame yourself, go for it," he whispered, running his fingertips lightly over Frank's knuckles. "But I won't. I'll tell you about Markus tomorrow, and then maybe you'll understand that it was never your fault. He operates in a specific way and with carefully selected people. You had no control over what happened today."

"I had some," Frank argued weakly. "I didn't have to let Jake suck me off. I didn't even want it that bad. I still don't know why I agreed."

"Jake is a handsome guy who can be very convincing."

"But he isn't—" Frank paused, stopping himself just in time. He couldn't say it to Gerard. Not ever, but especially not when Gerard was bleeding onto his pillow. "I wasn't and still am not interested in him that way."

"Why not?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Frank scoffed, moving an inch closer. His knees touched Gerard's, hidden under the comforter, and Gerard's grip on his hand tightened. "Yeah, exactly."

"I'm sorry I came here," Gerard said again. "I didn't know where else to go."

That, perhaps, was even worse because Frank knew Gerard had options. His brother, for one, whom he could have called to pick him up. Brian, the manager, had probably been way closer than Frank's apartment, too. It broke Frank's heart just a little to know Gerard had probably walked the distance from the club to his place with a singular thought of Frank being the only one he could trust. A guy who had betrayed him in the first place, who had *made* him suffer. It didn't matter if Gerard didn't want to hear it. Frank was responsible for everything that had happened, and it would take him a long time to forgive himself.

"I'm glad you did," he whispered and flipped their hands to gather Gerard's palm in his own. It pressed his thumb close to Gerard's wrist, and he zeroed in on the pulse he felt beneath the skin. It was slow, rhythmic, and, most importantly, present. A sign of life Frank was almost desperately in need of now. "Go to sleep, you need to rest. We can talk about it tomorrow."

“You promise?”

Frank sighed and brought Gerard’s hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss over his knuckles.

“I promise,” he confirmed. “Sleep.”

*

Gerard looked horrible but all things considered, Frank believed it could have been much worse. He had a spectacular case of a black eye going, the bruise dark and his eyelid swollen, and there was a cut on his cheek where a fist had connected with it, but at least he didn’t look like he was going to fall over anymore. He was limping as he emerged from Frank’s bedroom late in the afternoon with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders and his clothes nowhere to be seen, but he managed a smile as Frank rushed from the couch to help him stand.

“Hey, I’m fine,” he shook his head when Frank mapped his chest and sides with trembling hands. “Frank, I’m *fine*.”

“You’re not fine,” Frank argued instantly. “But you will be. I’ve got so much shit for you that it feels like I’ve bought out half of the pharmacy.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to.”

Gerard’s eyebrows raised the best they could, a grimace of pain crossing his face when the skin pulled tighter around his eyes. He looked like he wanted to say something else – probably apologize again or tell Frank he needed to go home to water his plants or whatever other bullshit excuse he wanted to come up with – but Frank wasn’t having any of it. After he made sure Gerard could walk on his own and wouldn’t end up with a split head after falling on the ground, he let go of his sides and gestured back towards the hallway.

“You need to shower,” he said slowly, watching Gerard’s reaction. “I’ll find you something to wear in the meantime, and then we’ll take care of the bruises.”

“Why, do I stink so bad?” Gerard’s lips curled into a smirk. “You could have said so.”

To be fair, they both did. Gerard had come directly to Frank after his performance last night, and Frank hadn’t had a shower after his adventures with Jake, either, but he hardly paid it any attention. “You need to wash these,” he rolled his eyes, pointing at Gerard’s scraped legs. “And I think there’s blood in your hair.”

“Is there?”

“Just get in the shower,” Frank sighed. “I’ll bring in the clothes.”

It was a strange experience to walk into his bathroom and find a naked man in his shower. Frank did his best not to look, eyes glued to the ground as the sound of water hitting the glass compartment filled the room almost as heavily as the steam did. He still caught glimpses of Gerard, of course – the line of his back and the curl of his ass, barely visible through the fog, and the darker blur of his wet hair as he washed it, but he didn’t stay inside the bathroom for longer than

necessary and didn't do anything crazy like try to crawl into the shower with him. He left the clothes he found on the closed lid of the toilet, found a towel for Gerard to use and hung it on the rack next to the shower, dug out a spare toothbrush, and then he left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. There were things more important than his desires. Having Gerard alive was what mattered most.

When Gerard emerged minutes later with his hair dripping water onto his still naked shoulders, Frank merely nodded at him and bypassed him in the bathroom door. His shower was quicker than Gerard's, rough and harsh, his skin turning pink as he scrubbed himself clean. He wanted to get rid of Jake. He tried to wash him away and never, ever remember that his hands had touched him, that his mouth had been around him. No amount of water or soap was going to wash away his guilt, however, and as he found Gerard splayed carelessly on the couch, it hit him with twice the previous force. There were so many wounds, so many cuts and bruises. There was so much damage on that perfect body.

"If you apologize again, I'm gonna make you look the same way I do," Gerard's eyes remained closed when Frank got on his knees next to the couch, but he did point his finger at Frank and smiled. "I can hear you thinking, and I swear I'm gonna beat you up if you say you're sorry."

"I could take you down so easily now."

"Don't underestimate me," Gerard's eye cracked open as he sent him an amused look from beneath the forearm he had pressed to his forehead. It turned into a frown when Frank reached for his right foot, gently placing it on his thigh. "So, you've got your recorder?"

"You don't have to tell me about it now. Let me patch you up first, hm?"

"Counterproductive. Patch me up while I talk."

"Gerard."

"*Frank*."

He pressed against the ankle harder in warning, but Gerard only sighed and shrugged, eyes closing again. He could be a stubborn little shit when he wanted to be. Frank knew that already, so after staring intently at him and wishing he would gaze back at him, Frank relented and reached to drag his bag closer to the couch. He didn't have time to transfer the last recording to his laptop, but there were over four remaining hours on the tape. He didn't think he'd want to hear about Markus for that long, anyway.

"Okay," he said after he'd pressed play, resuming his work with Gerard's ankle. It was definitely sprained, but Gerard could rotate it a little, so the broken bone was probably not a threat. He grabbed the first tube of the cooling gel and squirted it directly onto Gerard's skin, making him hiss. "Sorry. It's supposed to be cold."

"Asshole," Gerard murmured. "So yes, Markus. Well, after Bert's death, I had a good couple of months I don't remember much of. They got me clean in the hospital, but I went right back to it the moment I was out. For the record, I know it was dumb. I saw someone die from an overdose, yet I jumped right into it the first chance I got, but it was just… I was so devastated. I didn't know what to fucking do with myself when Bert wasn't there."

"You were grieving," Frank supplied, fingers rolling gently around the swelling of Gerard's foot.

"Yeah, I was. But it was like nothing I've ever experienced before. It felt like someone was cutting

me open over and over again. This," Gerard pointed at himself. "This is nothing compared to the pain I felt when he died."

Frank felt bile rise in his throat. What would he feel if Gerard had died last night?

"But you overcame it somehow," he noted in a tight voice. "How did that happen?"

"Gradually," Gerard shrugged. "There was an investigation after Bert's death, and it was about that time when *Labyrinth* closed. Turned out it was one of the bartenders who dealt drugs under the counter there, and he has been Bert's main source. He got arrested, Noah got accused of approving these deals. It was a shitshow," Gerard sighed. He rolled his ankle a little, checking the work Frank did, and then settled back against the cushions as Frank reached for a different ointment and moved onto his calves and knees. "Everyone was under the investigation, especially me."

"You? Why? You were the victim."

"Hardly," Gerard pursed his lips minutely. "No one forced me to start doing drugs, not physically at least, and these were times when no one stopped to think that maybe I was coerced. I lived with him, though, so they needed to ensure no foul play was involved."

"What fucking foul play?"

"Calm down," Gerard smiled, gesturing with his hand to where Frank had stopped rubbing at the cuts on his knees out of pure shock. "I could have done it to him. I didn't, but theoretically, there was no way to prove I haven't administered a deadly dosage. They found nothing, though. The autopsy proved he had been shooting up long before he was found dead, and I had been at work at the time. Many people have corroborated that. I was free to go after that. I almost wish I didn't."

"What? Why?"

"I didn't want to be alone," Gerard sighed, sliding down the couch a little to present Frank with his bruised side. Feeling a little unsteady, Frank gripped the hem of his underwear and pulled it low enough to get to his darkening hipbone. "It's stupid, okay, I know that now, but back then… I was still drugged out of my mind, and I was seriously in a bad place. Suicide thoughts bad. I didn't want to die, but I didn't want to sit in my… no, *our* apartment and look at the things he left behind. I thought at least in prison there would be people."

"Gee—"

"But I was innocent," Gerard craned his neck to look at Frank. "And I didn't kill myself. My brother finally showed up and helped me get back on my feet a little."

"Where was he this whole time? Why didn't he come earlier?"

"We hadn't been in touch since I dropped out of high school. I hadn't even seen him once in these seven years I spent with Bert. He only heard about it because my name got mentioned in a newspaper that exploited the club dealing drugs controversy. I never thought to call him, either, because he was younger than me, and it just felt wrong. He had his own life to worry about. He didn't need to deal with his fuck-up of an older brother."

"You weren't a fuck-up."

It came out too fast and too loud, making Gerard smile softly.

"I kind of was, Frank," he rolled his eyes at him. "But it doesn't matter. He did more than I could

have ever asked him for. At the time, I fought tooth and nail to stay where I was, but Mikey just gathered my things, made me sign up a termination of my apartment lease when I was drunk, and then forced me out of the flat and into a car. I was in a rehab center before I even knew what was happening."

"That's a little harsh."

"Yeah, but I needed harsh. I would have never gone anywhere if he didn't force me, and he knew what he was doing. In the end, it all paid up, and even if I was pretty pissed off at him back then, he turned out to be right. I would have died the same way Bert did if Mikey didn't drag me off to rehab."

"I'm so sorry," Frank whispered, moving up Gerard's body again. He helped him flip onto his back again and leaned over him, examining his face. "Be quiet for a moment, alright? I need to get these."

He rubbed the lotion on Gerard's forehead and cheek, careful not to press too hard. It was hard to breathe with Gerard looking up at him so carefully, occasionally wincing when the antiseptic in the ointment stung but going pliant split seconds later, but all in all, Frank thought he was doing alright. His hand wasn't shaking, and he was mostly collected, even if his mind was plowing from one horrible image to the other. First, it was that initial punch Gerard must have received, then the kick to his ribs, and then the pool of blood he must have lain in as these people kept hitting him. He could almost feel how much it had to hurt when Gerard's lip had split, his mouth filling with blood.

This time, his hand did tremble. He touched Gerard's bottom lip with a ridiculous thought that Gerard could easily be doing it himself, he didn't need Frank to rub it for him, and he was genuinely going for a strictly medical touch. He just wanted to brush the cut, make sure it wouldn't get infected. What happened, however, was his ointment-wet thumb slid over the cut and followed the line of Gerard's lips, first the bottom one, then the top. They were so soft, he noticed. His eyes were glued to how they gave under his fingers, how Gerard parted them slightly to give him better access. He shivered when a soft, warm exhale touched his fingertips.

Gerard gripped at his wrist, and Frank was sure he was going to push him away. He held him in place, though, long enough to force Frank to glance up and meet his eyes, and then his lips pursed, and he kissed the tips of Frank's fingers.

"Thank you," he whispered, his breath still hot.

"What for?"

"Everything."

Frank yanked his hand back as if burnt, ignoring the disappointment that made its way to Gerard's face. He couldn't do it. The friendship was already hard to maintain without Gerard getting his lips on him, and Frank was still beating himself over the head with how everything that had happened was his fault. This was the best he could do, try and mend Gerard back, but he couldn't stand the gratitude. There was nothing Gerard should be grateful for.

There were still things he needed to help him with, however, and he did so, gritting his teeth and shaking his head at himself. At least it was dressing him this time, not undressing, but it still felt wrong how turned on he was, despite the circumstances, to feel the skin of Gerard's thighs as he helped him pull the sweatpants up, the warmth of his chest as he slid a clean t-shirt over his head. He went to make coffee to distance himself from Gerard for a moment, to clear his head and tell his

dick to calm the fuck down, but then Gerard was taking a cup from him and throwing his legs over Frank's lap, and none of his efforts mattered.

He looked up at Gerard, and he was in love with him. There was no going around it, no other way to call it. He had fallen in love with him, and he didn't know what the fuck to do.

"You were gonna tell me about Markus," he prompted, desperate now to force Gerard to stop looking at him. He crossed his legs, one over the other, to keep Gerard's bandaged ankle elevated on his knee and hid his face behind his coffee mug. "When does he show up in your story?"

"Right after I was out of rehab," Gerard seemed oblivious to Frank's struggles, much to his relief. "It took months before I was ready to venture out into the world again. When I finally did, I had virtually the same things I would have if I had gone to prison. The money was gone, my apartment was gone, I found out *Labyrinth* had closed."

"But Mikey…?"

"Mikey still helped," Gerard nodded. "The apartment I live in now was his at first. I moved in with him, but it didn't last long. I was still a drug addict, and he had a newborn daughter. I can't blame him for not wanting to have me around her."

"Do you see her now?"

"Oh, all the time," Gerard's smile turned soft. "She's all grown up now. I don't see Mikey as often as I would like, but we stay in touch. He visits every couple of weeks."

"Is it strange to him to visit you in his old apartment?"

"I don't think so. He never complained. All he bitches about is that he's scared one of my toys will be on display when he brings his daughter."

Gerard laughed at that, high and loud, and Frank's mind short-circuited. He didn't think Gerard was talking about action toys or figurines, either, and he really wished Gerard would have invited him inside that day he had walked him home. It must have shown on his face, a blush maybe, or his eyes widening because Gerard chuckled again and used his uninjured foot to kick Frank in the thigh.

"Sorry," Frank uttered automatically.

"You're adorable when you're embarrassed," Gerard grinned. "Okay, but – the money. That was still an issue. Without the job, I knew I wouldn't be able to support myself for long. Mikey had paid the rent for like three months upfront and left me some money, but it wasn't a lot. *House* was only in the process of being renovated at that point, and I knew I wanted to go and try to get hired by the new management, but it would take months. I had no other skills, no other plan. It felt like a miracle when Markus approached me at the time."

"He found you?"

"I'm pretty sure he had me followed," Gerard hummed pensively. "I was at a café, trying to bribe the barista to give me a discount on coffee. I don't remember what arguments I used, but they clearly weren't working, and I was desperate. Coffee was what kept me alive when I couldn't have drugs. I was going out of my fucking mind. Then this older guy shows up, all dressed in a suit – an expensive one at that – and flashes his card. No words exchanged, no questions asked. He only wanted to know if I took sugar with my coffee."

“Oh, wow.”

“That was exactly what I thought, too. He didn’t even talk to me when we waited for our coffee. He just stood there and watched me. He gestured for me to follow when we had our mugs, and I did. I felt like I owed him.”

“So what did he want?”

Gerard stretched further on the couch, bracing himself for a long story.

“He introduced himself as Markus. Nothing more, nothing less, just Markus. Said he had been a regular at *Labyrinth* and that he had always loved my performances. I didn’t remember him, which meant I’d never given him one of these awful private shows, but that felt safer somehow. If he didn’t see me as a whore then he couldn’t be offering the same thing Bert had wanted me to do, right?” Gerard laughed without much humor. “He told me he had a blooming business and needed employees. Someone with my set of skills, as he called it.”

“He sounds… kind of gross.”

“No, here’s the thing, he wasn’t,” Gerard shook his head. “You’d expect an old creep to try to touch me or be vulgar, but he wasn’t. He kept his distance, didn’t try to get his hands on me apart from shaking my hand as he introduced himself, he was polite and well-spoken. He sounded like a true businessman who was scavenging for talent.”

“Easy to fall for a lie, then.”

“You have no idea how easy. To be honest, he didn’t give me many details on what the job would be, but he had me hooked already and knew it. He said he needed someone to do collaborative performances for an audience in the new elite club he invested in, and when I asked what the shows were about, he only said they varied and slid a check over the table. Jesus, Frank. I’d never seen a sum of money that big, not even if I gathered the salary and the tips I got for a month at *Labyrinth*. And that was only for one show, for an hour of my time. I felt like the luckiest motherfucker on the planet.”

“It sounds fishy,” Frank noted. He didn’t even realize he was absently rubbing his hands over Gerard’s calves as he spoke, careful to avoid his ankle, and Gerard was now too invested in the story for him to try and pull him out. He dug his fingers harder into the skin and continued the massage as Gerard sighed.

“I know, and I should have seen it then, but I was too happy. It sounded too good to be true, but I *needed* it to be. I remember thinking that fate couldn’t be as cruel as to take the love of my life away and then throw me into the hands of a psycho right after that, you know? I needed the money, and Markus was excellent at playing this sweet, concerned guy, getting right under my skin.”

“You agreed.”

“Of course I did. It wasn’t even a question in my mind.”

“So what happened?”

“He invited me over to sign a contract. It was supposed to happen right before my first performance, which should have told me I was in danger. How would I get the routine right without any time?” Gerard’s smile fell, and Frank felt his muscles tense beneath his hands. What came out next was almost a sneer. “But I got it just right.”

Frank felt it again then – the terrifying reality he was about to discover. He got better at reading Gerard's expressions, and the one he saw at that moment, the absolute disgust mixed with shame, was the same one he had worn when he had told him about Bert. He didn't have to think for long about what to do, it came naturally, and Gerard curled into him the second Frank was lying next to him, getting two handfuls of his t-shirt. God, he was trembling. Frank pulled him in with a hand between his shoulder blades and tucked Gerard's head under his chin.

"You don't have to tell me," he reminded him. "I'm pretty sure I know where this is going. I don't need to hear it."

"But I need to say it," Gerard mumbled against his chest. "There isn't much there, really. I signed the contract without reading it, and Markus was on me in seconds. He told me I looked nervous and that he would help me relax. I knew what he had in mind even before he pulled out the syringe, and for a moment, I wanted to tell him no. But I missed it, you know," Gerard shook his head, his fists tightening in Frank's shirt. "I missed the bliss. I missed not feeling pain. He was the second man who took hold of my arm, and I let him."

"Gerard, no, shh—"

"He led me from his office down the hall to the basement," Gerard ignored him and continued. "It was this old mansion-type house, far away from the city's center. I was gone by that point. The world was spinning, I was sweating, I could barely stand. I only remember fragments of what happened next."

"Please, stop—"

"You know what stuck with me, for some reason? It's not the pain I felt, it isn't the humiliation I felt. It isn't even the other guys who were there with me or the crowd that gathered to watch us. It's this phrase they all kept chanting," Gerard shuddered so hard Frank's hand jumped to the back of his head and tangled in his hair, ready to hold onto him in case he was going to fall from the couch. "It was so loud and seemed to be going on forever when they all took turns. Just the never-ending litany of *fuck the whore, fuck the whore.*"

The silence that settled between them was deafening. Frank had a distant notion that his hold on Gerard's hair must be painful, his fingers gripping the strands so hard even his knuckles were going numb. He didn't know how to stop. It felt like Gerard would vanish into thin air if Frank let go; like he would be pulled back through time and thrown right back into the hell he had managed to climb out of all these years ago. He was still trembling slightly in Frank's hold, his shoulders shaking, and it took Frank way too long to realize what it meant. He took a shuddery breath and lifted his eyes, setting them on the opposite wall.

"How long?" he asked.

"Until Mikey found me and saved me again," Gerard admitted. "Half a year."

When Frank pulled him back and looked at him, Gerard's cheeks were red, and the front of Frank's t-shirt stuck to his skin, wet from tears. He wanted to say something – anything, at this point, any words of encouragement, to remind Gerard that this was not his life anymore. He was a glorious performer now, doing things the way he wanted and having a respectful audience. He was never going to go back to this hellhole. He wanted to promise him things, too. How he would go with him to the NYPD and report the beating and Markus' business. How he would do anything in his power to bring down both him and Jake and anyone else who had ever harmed Gerard in any way. He wanted to let Gerard know that things would only get better from now on because Frank would personally make sure he would always be safe.

He didn't say any of these things. He leaned in and pressed his lips to Gerard's forehead instead, and Gerard fell apart in his arms when a choked-off sob slipped past his bruised lips. Frank trembled along with him this time, Gerard's arm sliding over his waist to his back so he could press himself even closer, and Frank held him through it and kept kissing him until Gerard's sobs turned into deeper breaths and until his heart Frank felt thumping next to his own slowed down.

"Shh," he whispered, stroking Gerard's hair. Gerard whined low in his throat, and it sounded surprisingly close to Frank's name, but he didn't even care. "Shh, Gee. I've got you now. I've got you."

They stayed like that, embracing each other in silence for a very long time.

*

Frank had never liked the police. It was an inculcated hatred, something he had learned when he had still been a little boy, and each of his friends had avoided the police officers while smuggling alcohol out of their houses or secretly smoking after school. It wasn't much better now as he stood in the brightly lit room of the 10th district NYPD station with his hands curled over the back of Gerard's chair. He was well aware that he was looming over him, face set in stone and eyes dark, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. After the round of questions Gerard had heard just now, Frank wasn't going to step away from him even for an inch. He didn't even question what would happen if the guy sitting across from them in his blue uniform reached out to touch Gerard's hands clasped on top of the table.

He wasn't even a bad fellow. No, quite the opposite. He had been very thorough with his questioning, but he hadn't raised his voice even once, and he had had this genuine compassion written all over his face as Gerard had described the events that had occurred after his performance on Wednesday evening and then everything from his past. Frank had nodded a couple of times when the cop had looked over at him, but he had stayed quiet the entire time. He wasn't sure if there had been anything more he could have contributed to the story.

"Gerard," the man – officer Lone, if Frank was reading the plate on his chest correctly – said. "I am very sorry for everything that has happened to you. We will do our best to bring these men to justice."

"Which is what, exactly?" Frank finally found his voice. He saw how Gerard flinched in his seat and placed one of his hands on his shoulder, letting him know everything was still alright. "What is the plan here?"

The cop glanced questioningly at Gerard, but he only waved him off. "Go on," he said. "I'd tell Frank everything the second I walked out of here, anyway."

"Well, after your initial claim, we have already dispatched someone to talk to your boss and a couple of different businesses along the way," Lone explained. "The club is in a heavily populated area, so it's very likely some cameras have recorded the attack that occurred. It's good that you have decided to report it early, too. I know of many cases when the victim waited too long, and the recording was overwritten by new footage. I don't think that will be an issue in this case, though, so that will be the main source of evidence against these guys."

"In the beating case, that is," Frank concluded. "What about the other case?"

“That’s more complicated,” Lone sighed, leaning back in his chair. “What you’ve described happened many years ago, so the physical evidence is probably long gone, but we will get a warrant to search the place you’ve mentioned anyway. It doesn’t seem like this Markus guy is out of the business if he was so eager to remind you to stay quiet, so there might be something there.”

“He’ll know then, though,” Frank’s hand tightened around Gerard’s shoulder. “He’ll know you guys are onto him, and he’ll know who talked.”

“We can be discreet if we want to, mister Iero,” Lone sent him a soft smile. “We’ll start with Jake Holder. We can hold him for twenty-four hours, which should be enough to make him sing. I don’t think he’s fully aware of what kind of business Markus is running, so our goal is to make him scared enough to stay quiet afterward.”

“And can you do that?”

“You seem very apprehensive of us yourself. What do you think?”

Frank would get angry if Lone wasn’t so acutely right. He shut his mouth and nodded, receiving a pleased smile back.

“The beating is almost certainly a won case,” the officer continued. “You’re lucky Markus showed up in person, Gerard, or we’d have trouble pinning it on him. I don’t think we’ll need a hearing for that, even. If his lawyers are smart, and I’m sure they are, he will take the offered deal, giving us more time.”

“You’re offering this dick a fucking deal? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“We are,” Lone grounded Frank with his gaze. “He’s a shady character. He won’t want this case to go to court because he’ll be too scared of his other crimes surfacing in the process. The deal will put him in prison for up to two years, and that’s a lot of time to investigate him while he’s unable to harm Gerard in any way.”

Frank felt a shiver run down his spine at the mere mention of it.

“Do you think he’ll try again if we publish the biography?”

“I’d wait with the publication for now,” the cop nodded firmly. “It will bring unnecessary attention to this entire case, something we want to avoid at all costs, but even without the book, I think you need to be careful.”

“I will be,” Gerard said quietly.

“I mean properly careful,” Lone sighed. “It shouldn’t take more than a couple of days, maybe up to two weeks, to get Markus sentenced based on the assault charge, but you must watch your back until then. Don’t leave the house alone after dark, have someone stay with you just in case. Always – and I mean *always* – have your phone with you and make sure it’s charged. Put the paramedics on speed dial.”

“Jesus Christ,” Frank groaned when Gerard’s snatched his wrist, linking their fingers together. He was reticent now and he shook a little in his seat. Frank wanted nothing more than to help him to his feet and walk him out of there. “Shouldn’t it be you guys?”

“Calling the ambulance will alert us, too, and they need to be the first to reach Gerard in case something happens.”

“Nothing is going to happen.”

“No, of course not,” Lone agreed. “But better safe than sorry. Do you have someone to stay with you, Gerard?”

“I mean, I could ask my brother,” the hand that wasn’t holding Frank’s lifted to Gerard’s lips as he nibbled at his thumb. “I don’t know. He’s got a family, but—”

Frank couldn’t listen to it, not even for a second longer. He squeezed Gerard’s fingers, his words coming to a halt, and he didn’t even look at him as he spoke directly to officer Lone.

“Gerard will stay with me,” he said firmly. “Do you need me to write down my address for you?”

“Frankie, I can’t—”

“Hush. It’s not up for discussion. Address, officer?”

“If you would. And your phone number, just in case.”

Frank supplied these easily, leaning over Gerard’s shoulder to scribble the information on a piece of paper. He could feel Gerard’s eyes on his face and saw his frown as he turned his head and sent him a smile. Maybe it was a strange offer to let someone into his house after knowing them for three weeks, but Frank didn’t care. He would never be calm knowing Gerard was god knows where with god knows who, and he still felt responsible for this entire masquerade happening in the first place. He would keep an eye on Gerard if it was the last thing he’d ever do.

He thanked officer Lone for the both of them as Gerard stood up, head hanging low between his shoulders. He looked exhausted, the bruises on his face appearing darker and his eyes deep-set, less lively. He never let go of Frank’s hand, holding onto it almost too tightly as the cop opened the door to the interrogation room for them and gestured for them to go, and Frank clasped his fingers tightly around Gerard’s wrist and pulled him along. They walked slowly, Gerard limping and wincing now and then when he put too much weight on his sprained ankle, and Frank wondered how he ended up in this situation in the first place.

His biography was not happening. Travis’s article would have to be published without it, and technically, Frank’s job was done here. He was still going to edit out the words and put it into a ready piece, just in case there was a way to get it out there in the future, but he seriously doubted it was ever going to happen. There were too many details in everything Gerard had told him to publish and not suffer the backlash. If the Markus story didn’t retaliate, then it would be Gerard’s high school teacher, Noah, or anyone else whom Gerard had come in contact with. This book getting published meant Gerard would pack his bags and move across the world out of fear of being pursued by someone with a vengeance.

Frank couldn’t stand how heartbreaking it was. It was someone’s life. It was Gerard’s life, tragic and painful, and he had to hide it from everyone just to stay alive.

The taxi took them to Gerard’s place first. There was no need to discuss that with Gerard, either. As much as Frank loved to see him in his clothes, the sweatpants were always too short and the t-shirts a little too baggy, and he needed him to be comfortable. He wanted Gerard to have other things, too. Books he wanted to read, movies he wanted to watch. He caught his surprised glance as the taxi stopped in front of his apartment building, but it was not the astonishment that gave Frank pause. It was the shadow of fear, the downright terror that crossed Gerard’s face, that made Frank choke on his next inhale. He knew what Gerard was thinking and reached for him before the doubt could properly settle in.

“We’re just going to get some of your stuff,” he rubbed Gerard’s knuckles soothingly. “And then we’ll catch another cab back to my place.”

“You don’t have to do this, Frank,” Gerard shook his head, even if he was already following Frank out of the car. “I mean it. I can get Mikey to come over, or I can go stay with him.”

“He’s got his family, and you’d hate putting them in danger.”

“I hate putting you in danger, too,” Gerard snapped at him. “You have no obligations towards me.”

“I’m not doing it out of obligation.”

“Why, then?” Gerard all but whined as he led them toward the building. “I don’t understand what you could possibly hope to get out of it. I have nothing else to tell you for your story, and it’s not even getting published now. I don’t think I can help you edit it out, either, I… I can’t read it again, not so soon and not with all this shit happening. Why the fuck would you want to help me?”

“Because I—,” *have fallen in love with you.* “care for you.”

“You… what?”

“Is this surprising to you?” Frank scoffed, helping Gerard into the elevator. “You’ve told me the most vulnerable moments of your life, and you’re an amazing guy.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re also full of shit if you really think so,” Frank sent him a cheeky grin, grateful that it raised the corners of Gerard’s bruised mouth. “I mean Christ, Gee. What do you want me to say here?”

“The truth?”

Frank had never been as grateful for the end of the elevator ride as he was at that moment. It wasn’t the right time to tell anyone the truth. He needed Gerard to feel comfortable and safe enough to stay with him until all this blew off, and he didn’t think he’d appreciate knowing that Frank was rapidly developing unrequited feelings for him. They were friends, for fuck’s sake. Friends who were now tangled in a web of assaults and abuse, illegal gatherings, prostitution, and drug deals, but still friends, nonetheless. It didn’t matter that Frank would call Gerard one thing in his head and something else to his face. He would be safe. He would be there with him, and he would be alive.

He needed to tell him something, however, because Gerard froze with a hand on the doorknob leading to his flat and was looking at him expectantly as if Frank’s answer was going to decide if he would let him in. Frank crossed the distance between them and put a gentle hand on the side of Gerard’s bruised cheek.

“I think you’re a survivor. I think you’re stronger than anyone I’ve ever met, and I think your story could still teach people how to make the right choices,” Frank’s face was as open as he could muster, and he could see the shadow of pain crossing Gerard’s before his doubts shattered. “I think you’re beautiful, inside and outside, and I also think you need to let other people take care of you. I’m not Bert, Gee. I’m not Markus.”

“I know, Frank,” Gerard groaned. “I fucking know.”

“I’m not them,” Frank repeated. “After everything you’ve gone through, I can’t blame you for not wanting to put your trust in a guy you met not even a month ago, and I know you’ll want to believe

I'm lying to you, but…," he shrugged, tightening the hold on Gerard's jaw. "I'm not. I'm not going to hurt you. Let me take care of you."

"I do trust you," Gerard's voice was broken, as if he was on the verge of crying, and Frank forced the brightest smile he could come up with onto his face and brushed his thumb across Gerard's skin.

"Great," he cocked his head to the side with what he hoped was a playful grin. "Then open the door, and let's see these toys you apparently have scattered everywhere."

*

They worked out the routine in the first hour Gerard had been a temporary resident of Frank's apartment. The first thing they did was fight over who was going to take a bed. Frank was adamant it should be Gerard, whose ankle had become worse after carrying a couple of bags of his clothes, shoes, and books and whose cheek had turned from red to purple. Gerard was stubborn enough to sit on the couch and cross his arms over his chest, saying he wouldn't kick Frank out of his own bed. Frank had to physically drag Gerard down the hall and nearly throw him on the mattress, crawling after him and settling on his back to reach a truce. Maybe it was strange to be sleeping in the same bed together when no emergency was happening, but Frank preferred it this way. He didn't *know* what was going to happen. Officer Lone had told Gerard to watch his back, which was precisely what Frank intended to do at night and during the day.

Then came the food discourse. Gerard didn't have a problem with anything Frank had at home, not in the slightest, and the only thing he requested them to buy was a creamer for his coffee. This issue was entirely on Frank. He didn't want to force his vegetarianism on Gerard but couldn't stand the idea of having dead animals in his fridge, either. He tried to find a solution for a good portion of fifteen minutes in the shop they stopped by to stack up, but Gerard only laughed at him and pulled the frozen chicken from his hands before Frank could gag for real.

"Stop it," he scolded when Frank frowned, trying to get it back. "I'm pretty sure your vegetables and beans won't cause me permanent damage. I might even learn something."

"But—"

"No, Frank. We can order pizza at some point, and I promise I'll put as much meat on it as I want, okay?" Gerard's smile was so soft Frank could feel his resolves crumbling. "Now leave the chicken alone and grab eggs, will you? I make killer omelets."

So Frank left the chicken alone and shopped the way he did for himself, doing his best to ignore the curious looks Gerard kept throwing his way. He read every packaging and asked about a million questions about every little product, and Frank would probably get tired of it really fast if it wasn't so endearing at the same time. He managed to sneak chicken nuggets through the checkout without Gerard noticing and called it a success. He sent him to buy more cigarettes than they were probably capable of carrying instead – God knew they would need them – and tried not to dwell on how natural shopping with Gerard felt.

After all that was sorted out, things became relatively easy. Gerard settled on the couch and spent way too long making excuses to Brian as to why he wouldn't be able to perform for at least the following two weeks, and Frank fought with himself about whether he should or shouldn't be

calling Travis. Technically he wasn't allowed to tell Travis the details of the case, but Gerard was in no mood to talk about it again – not that Frank could blame him – and he could feel his chest tightening around the anxiety and the exhaustion he was feeling. Jesus, some crazy asshole was literally after them. Frank didn't think these things happened anywhere outside of Hollywood. He considered calling his mother for a moment but quickly decided against it. The last thing he and Gerard needed was Linda Iero, in a state of profuse panic, coming over to ensure they were still alive.

Gerard's eyebrows raised in question when Frank stood up, heading towards the balcony. He was still in the middle of his conversation with Brian, so Frank waved his phone at him to let him know things were still very much okay, and didn't wait for his reaction before grabbing their first cigarette pack and heading outside. It was bloody cold. He shivered as he lit the stick and dialed Travis' number.

"You asshole."

Frank winced, stealing a quick look behind. Gerard was still on the couch, but the phone was now nowhere in sight, replaced instead with a book.

"Hey, Trav," Frank sighed. "Before you say anything, I'll let you know that things got much more fucking complicated."

"You ditched me for your new boyfriend. This doesn't sound complicated."

"First of all, I didn't ditch you. I was working. Second, we have a fucking psychopath tailgating us, so some compassion would be nice."

"Nice to hear you didn't deny the boyfriend allegations," Frank could hear Travis' grin, but he was honestly too tired to explain. "And what the hell do you mean, a psychopath? Real talk, you don't sound too good. What the fuck happened, Frank?"

Frank told him everything. He didn't even mean to get into details, but Gerard looked engrossed in whatever he was reading and seemed to have forgotten Frank was even supposed to be in the room with him. He looked down from the balcony, gazing at the street his feet wouldn't touch in the next two weeks or so, and he spilled his guts to Travis like he hadn't to anyone in years. His story wasn't as poetic as Gerard's had been. He couldn't make the events sound romantic even when they were tragic, and he was unable to convey the deep emotions of loss and despair, but it didn't seem to matter. For the whole time Frank spoke, smoking one cigarette after the other and choking slightly on the smoke, Travis didn't say a word. If it wasn't for the affirmative hums he provided now and then, Frank would think he wasn't even there.

Moving over the events in quick succession made Frank realize just how insane everything was. He was basically on home arrest with a guy he met a month ago, whose wounds he needed to tend to and who would be sharing his bed. A brutal drug lord was looking for them – and it was *them* now, Frank realized that very well, not just Gerard – and they were hiding in the most obvious place. If Markus figured out Frank's name, it would be the end for them. The golden chain on Frank's door and his double locks would do nothing to stop him.

"Jesus," Travis whispered after Frank had finished talking. "You're not joking."

"I'm not joking," Frank confirmed. "I'm going to call Doug next and let him know the biography has to be postponed and that I need a couple of weeks off. Fuck, with the number of holidays I've accumulated over the years, I should just stay home for a year."

“He’s not gonna be happy.”

“I don’t give a damn about Doug’s happiness at the moment.”

“But you give a damn about Gerard’s.”

Despite being framed as a question, it obviously wasn’t one. “I do,” Frank confirmed. “This Jake character… it’s all my fault. I owe it to him.”

“You know, all these years I’ve known you, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in love,” Travis hummed contemplatively. “And before you argue, I know I haven’t always been… the best, with accepting these things and all, and I know I’ve given you shit for it, but seriously man, I’m glad. Maybe not thrilled to spend hours listening to details of your sex life later on, but still.”

“Who said I’m in love?”

“I did. You wanna argue with that?”

Frank looked over his shoulder again. Gerard’s body had sunk deeper into the cushions, the book held high above his face, and he was wearing glasses. *Glasses*. Frank had never known anyone who would look possibly even better with than without them, and if they did, it had always been a case of giving them this distinguished, serious look. Gerard didn’t look any smarter in them. He just looked lovely, head tilted to the side and his bottom lip worried between his teeth. Even with the bruises on his face, he was still perfect.

Frank shook his head and smiled, leaning against the balcony railing. “Nope.”

“That’s what I thought,” Travis was undoubtedly grinning on the other side of the line. “Well, buddy, let me know if you need anything. You’re gonna be stuck in there for a while, huh?”

Frank patiently explained that, yes, he was unlikely to be leaving his flat in the following two weeks and listened for a little longer how Travis complained about having to sit through the Friday meetings on his own. It was strange to hear him talk about their job like that – as if Frank’s life hadn’t taken a drastic turn, as if he was just having a day off and was supposed to get up in the morning and work on mundane, boring articles. It felt like an entirely different reality he had been brutally plucked from and thrown into whatever *this* was. He found he didn’t exactly mind, either; especially not when the balcony door opened and Gerard stepped out with a blanket wrapped so tightly around his shoulders that Frank could barely see him.

“Mind if I bum one?” he mouthed, pointing at the cigarettes.

“You were just reading. You get bored with things awfully quickly.”

“Mm, but I smelled it. Is this Travis?”

“Yeah,” Frank smiled. “You wanna say hi?”

To his surprise, Gerard did want to say hi. Frank was sure he was wearing a stupid expression when he wordlessly handed the phone to him, but Gerard only winked at him and mirrored his pose against the railing.

“Hey Travis, Gerard here,” he said, throwing an amused sideways look at Frank. “Bet you’re happy now that you’ve chosen your anniversary dinner over me, huh?”

Travis replied something that made Gerard laugh. It wasn’t just a singular sentence, either. He kept

on going and going, Gerard's smile getting more prominent and his eyes widening along with it, and finally, Frank turned around and leaned his elbow on the railing to take him fully in. The playful glimmer in his eyes had turned into something softer then, something almost caring, and Frank's stomach tightened nervously. Travis wouldn't tell Gerard about his feelings. No matter how uncomfortable he felt with Frank falling for a guy, he wouldn't ruin it for him by being an asshole. It did nothing to stop the anxiety from skyrocketing when Gerard cocked his head to the side, staring at him.

"You know, I think you're right," he said over the phone, dragging out each word. "You take care of yourself now, alright? We'll let you know if we run out of cigarettes."

When he handed Frank the phone back, the call was already disconnected.

"What did he tell you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Gerard smiled at him and crushed the cigarette on the railing where Frank's hand had been just seconds before. When Frank didn't stop squinting at him, he sighed and gestured at him to follow back inside. "Nothing, really. He gave me something to think about, that's all. Don't worry. He didn't spill any of your childhood secrets or weird things you do at work. Your secrets are safe with him."

Frank certainly fucking hoped so.

"Besides," Gerard waved a hand at him as he shrugged the blanket from his shoulders. He didn't settle back on the couch but limped towards the kitchen, and Frank watched him open the fridge and take in their inventory. "The most important information he provided was that I was to stay out of the kitchen and let you cook instead. Seeing how I was more than ready to make you this omelet, it's a little disappointing, but please," Gerard straightened up, pushing a box of eggs into Frank's hands. "Surprise me."

"You can make coffee," Frank offered generously. Travis was right about that bit, for sure. If there was one thing Frank was good at other than journalism, it was cooking. It was easy, too – just two friends making food and bypassing each other in the kitchen instead of Frank going out of his mind about both Markus and his feelings. He smiled when Gerard smiled and poked him gently in the ribs with a spatula when he came too close to him. "No peeking. I'm going to blow your mind."

Frank's stomach churned when Gerard leaned against the table to watch him work, and it kept churning long after the meal was done. He would have to get used to him, but it was still unsettling. He felt like a teenager again, hands getting sweaty and butterflies awaking in his guts when Gerard's hand brushed his when grabbing the plates or when he settled a few inches too close on the couch after they'd put Star Wars on TV. At least he wasn't popping random boners, that was something to be grateful for, but he still went stiff when Gerard leaned against his side halfway through the movie. He was warm, though, and he was still injured. Frank mentally scolded himself for being a wuss and wrapped his arm around him, pulling him in.

"Are you gonna miss it?" Gerard asked all of a sudden. Luke was in the middle of his training with Yoda, and Frank's eyelids were getting heavy despite his love for the franchise. He hadn't even realized he had been playing idly with Gerard's hair.

"Miss what?"

"Your job. Travis said you guys always see each other in the office on Fridays and that he was worried when you didn't show up today. He also covered for you with your boss, but I don't want to get you in trouble," Gerard lifted his hand to his mouth again, as he always did when he was

nervous. “If you need to go to work, go to work. I’ll be fine.”

“I do most of my job from home anyway, and trust me, I am *thrilled* not to see Doug for the next two weeks.”

“But you like it,” Gerard concluded. “When you’re stuck with me here, you won’t be able to interview people or take photos.”

“The interview I’m working on is with *you*, you moron,” Frank grinned at Gerard’s slightly hurt expression, nudging him in the shoulder. “And I can still take photos. I don’t see why not.”

“Of what, the walls?”

“Of you.”

“Oh.”

The biting around Gerard’s thumb intensified, so Frank sighed and reached over to pull at his wrist.

“You’re different like this,” he started slowly, gazing above the TV and out through the balcony door. “I was thinking about how we should maybe document the injuries in case they are needed in court, but Lone beat me to it. That doesn’t mean I can’t still take photos of you.”

“I must look great when I’m stuffing my bruised mouth with your vegetarian lasagna.”

“You look better than you think,” Frank snorted, shaking his head. “But no, I mean… you looked peaceful before when you were reading. You look peaceful now, too. If you agree, I could use photos like that in this biography. The image we painted of you so far will raise some eyebrows, and maybe it would be good to show people this side of you, too.”

“I don’t have sides.”

“No, you do. When people buy this biography, they’ll expect to read about a performer or a star, but that’s not all you are, right?” Frank tilted his head. “The further into it they get, the more human you become. All that struggle we talked about, all this pain. I can’t only use photos of you on stage for these chapters, Gee. I need to show them a person.”

“I’m never like this with others,” Gerard disagreed. “Even the stupid glasses. No one knows I need to wear them. If I have to read something in *House* or anywhere else, really, I just squint. I only wear them at home.”

“You’ve told me stuff most people would be too afraid or ashamed ever to admit out loud. I don’t think you need to worry about the glasses. And I still want to take a picture of you when you wear them.”

“Frank—”

“After that’s gone,” Frank pressed his fingers gently to Gerard’s cheek, which had been turning gradually more and more yellow, the bruise settling in. “And this,” he stroke the skin next to his eye. “And this, too,” he touched Gerard’s lower lip.

He didn’t imagine the shudder that went through Gerard, strong enough to make him visibly tremble, and didn’t mishear a gasp that fell from his mouth. He wanted to ask what had happened. Maybe he had pushed at the skin too hard; maybe he had hurt him.

“Will you teach me how to take photos?”

Frank laughed and couldn’t stop himself from planting a kiss on top of Gerard’s head.

“Sure,” he promised. “Just let them freeze Han Solo first.”

*

Frank was woken up that first night by a sudden wailing sound. He had no idea what was happening at first. Tired and not fully awake, he felt blindly for the light switch of his bedside table lamp as panic gripped his throat. He had been dreaming about Gerard, he knew that much. There had been a lot of blood there, and the constant chanting still rang in his ears as he tried to find his bearings. It was the exact goddamn phrase Gerard had mentioned before, one Frank could not repeat out loud or even in his head when he thought about it consciously.

A thought crossed his mind that the shaking he felt must be Markus trying to break into the bedroom. How hard would it be for him to find out who Frank was and where he lived? Frank’s hand shook as he flipped the switch, and he winced as the light dug millions of tiny needles into his eyes.

It wasn’t Markus, and it wasn’t a group of disgusting men chanting for a whore to be fucked.

“I’m sorry,” Gerard’s voice was quiet, barely above a whisper, and the words came out choked. “I’m so sorry—”

“Gee?”

Gerard turned his head further to the side, hiding from Frank with his face pressed to the pillow. It didn’t stop the shaking of his shoulders and legs, the sobbing wrecking his entire body from head to toe. He tried to be quiet about it, but it took one look over his shoulder, Frank’s hand planted firmly on the mattress next to his stomach to show the tears streaming down his face. The kick to Frank’s stomach was worse than anything he had experienced, and his elbow bent until he could fit himself behind Gerard and pull him into his arms. It didn’t seem to help at all. If anything, whatever reserve Gerard had had before crumbled into pieces, and he choked, sharp and loud, on the next inhale.

“Shh, hey,” Frank slid a hand under Gerard’s neck and pulled him firmly into his chest with a hand over his stomach. “Gee, what’s going on?”

“This— *fuck*,” Gerard shook his head almost violently. “This is all so fucked up, Frankie.”

“I know it is,” Frank bit his tongue just in time to skip the pet name that threatened to fall from his lips. “But it’s going to be over soon, I promise.”

“And now I’m making it worse. I… you can’t even sleep, fuck, I’m sorry, I—”

“Stop it,” Frank’s arms tightened around Gerard’s body. “Stop, okay?”

“But—”

“No. I want you to be here. Get it into your head.”

Gerard's head twisted faintly to the side, and Frank managed to catch a glimpse of his gaze from behind his hair. He wasn't actually thinking about what he was doing. Brushing the bangs away felt natural, and Gerard didn't try to push him away. He didn't even tense, either, when Frank nuzzled into his neck and breathed in deeply. He gripped the wrist Frank had rested against his stomach, and their fingers slid together easily.

"Frank?"

"Hmm?"

"I hate asking for more," Gerard scoffed through his tears. "But can you stay like this for a moment? Just for a minute."

It didn't skip Frank's attention how Gerard flinched when he moved away, how his face fell in despair. He wasn't gone for long. He rearranged the covers, ensuring they were wrapped around them before he slid behind Gerard and hugged him again. This, too, was not something Frank had anticipated when he first invited Gerard to stay. Their sweatpants caught against each other, eliciting a muffled, weak chuckle from Gerard – much to Frank's delight – and his t-shirt got twisted beneath his body so uncomfortably he had to bounce against the bed a couple of times to get it straightened out. Then, though; then it was perfect. It was just Gerard, warm and relaxed against him, his hand holding Frank's and his foot hooking behind Frank's calf, and when Frank risked a look over his shoulders, the tears were gone.

"Should I keep the lights on?"

"I don't mind either way," Gerard sighed, sinking into the pillows. When Frank pressed his nose to his nape, he sighed and added. "I don't need the lights. I know I'm safe with you."

*

"I have no idea what I'm doing."

Gerard waved the camera Frank's way, arms spread to the sides and a pout on his lips. Frank grinned. He knew Gerard hadn't really been listening to a word he had been saying earlier, too focused on making breakfast, and was now hopeless when presented with a device. Frank wasn't going to complain. The omelet really had been exceptionally good, and although he was not a fan of repeating himself, he was going to make an exception. Not without a small dosage of exasperation, however – he wasn't going to give Gerard satisfaction. He sighed theatrically and pushed himself away from his desk, forcing his laptop closed.

"Alright, what do you want to photograph?"

Gerard's frown didn't go away as he looked between the camera in his hands and the world outside. It was a gloomy day, one of those days that reminded Frank why he hated winters in New York – the snow was nowhere to be seen, but the rain kept drizzling from the sky, making the streets dark, wet and uninviting. There was nothing pretty to take photos of, not even the distinctive yellow cab to make a picture worth anything, but Gerard looked dead set on it. Frank would laugh at how he couldn't appreciate the beauty of his apartment if he wasn't scared Gerard would take it seriously. He neither needed nor wanted Gerard to have another breakdown.

"I don't know," Gerard frowned harder. "I was thinking this," he gestured at the window. "But it

looks depressing. I don't want depressing."

"Well, for this," Frank nodded towards the window too. "You're gonna want to crank the ISO up to maybe four hundred, give or take."

Gerard looked at him as if Frank had told him a formula for a complicated chemical reaction, and it made Frank's grin bigger as he stood up and came over. He was familiar with his camera to the point of not even needing to look down at it. His hands moved on top of Gerard's, rearranging them so he could press in the right places. "Here," he reminded him, pressing against Gerard's index finger. "See these little numbers? That's where you adjust the ISO, or the light sensitivity, as you'd call it. Slide it right."

Gerard's eyebrows raised slightly, but he did as he was told, watching carefully how the indicator slid from a hundred up to four hundred. Not even an inch further, Frank noticed, and he smiled at himself. Gerard would get the hang of this sooner or later and would trust himself to make his own decisions. For now, he followed directions as carefully as possible, which was fine with Frank, too.

"That's it?" he asked, lifting the camera to his face. "Just point and click?"

"I have the shutter speed and aperture set on automatic, so yeah," Frank nodded. "Unless you want me to change it to manual so you can play around?"

"I don't even understand the words that are coming out of your mouth," Gerard rolled his eyes at him, making him chuckle. "Automatic's great."

Frank took a step back to give him room to work, and Gerard pointed the camera at the window and pressed the shutter. A familiar sound of the cogs working sounded through the room, then a couple more times as Gerard kept pressing, changing the angles with each picture.

"Alright, let's see them," Frank hummed, inching closer again. Gerard tilted the camera towards him and Frank opened the preview, squinting. They weren't bad photos. A little blurry due to Gerard's constantly trembling hands, and he would have brought the ISO maybe a little lower, but they were good. He smiled when Gerard cocked his head and showed him the latest one he took, the drenched balcony railing in full focus and the street working as its background. "They're not bad for an amateur."

"Oh wow, *thanks*."

"No, I mean it," Frank laughed at Gerard's offended expression. "They're good, Gee. We're just getting you familiar with the settings for now, anyway, but these aren't bad."

"Right," Gerard agreed. "Okay, so ISO 400 for the window shots, got it. What if I wanted to take photos inside?"

"Depends. Are we talking near the window or closer to the couch? Is your object stationary or moving?"

"Frank," Gerard whined.

"It all matters, I'm sorry. Come with me, come on," Frank grabbed his wrist and led him away from the window until he could settle back against the couch. It was far away from the balcony that they sat in the gloom of the rainy day and dark enough that Frank would be turning on the lights if he wasn't on a mission to teach Gerard something. "Okay, so – stationary?"

"I hope so."

“Alright, so I’d go with maybe a thousand,” Frank offered, waiting for Gerard to comply. “If you’d want to photograph something moving, you’d need to set the shutter on manual and on a short speed, but I think you’re good like that,” he leaned in to confirm and then leaned back, sending Gerard an encouraging smile. “So what’s the subject then?”

Gerard looked up from the camera and smirked, eyes narrowing. “Don’t move.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Gerard, no,” Frank pointed his finger at him even though Gerard was already moving, one hand pushing him back against the armrest of the couch and the other holding the camera up. “Oh my God, you stubborn ass.”

“If you want to take pictures of me with my glasses on, you have to sit through this,” Gerard was still grinning as he nudged his way closer to him, kneeling on the couch so he could look down at Frank. “Don’t panic. They’re gonna be saved on *your* camera.”

“If you give me a double chin, I’m gonna strangle you.”

“You don’t have a double chin,” Gerard sounded just a bit frustrated. “And if you did, it wouldn’t matter much now, would it? Just stay still. I’m trying to work here.”

Frank giggled lightly – fucking *giggled,* what the hell was wrong with him? – and settled back against the cushions to let Gerard do what he wanted. He was right, it didn’t matter. In the end, he would be the one with the power to keep or delete the photos, and it was only fair for Gerard to catch him in a vulnerable position if he was to do the same to him later on. He even allowed himself to relax enough to lift his arms over his head in what he hoped was a confident position. As confident, at least, as he could get with Gerard kneeling over him.

“That’s good enough for you?”

“Mm, yeah, nice,” Gerard hummed, the sound of the shutter deafening in Frank’s ears. “You kind of look like a jock but whatever.”

“You ever met a gay jock?” Frank grinned, tilting his head back. It left his throat exposed, his tattoos on display, and he could feel Gerard’s gaze zeroing in on the letters tattooed on his throat. Another photo was taken then, and then another few in quick succession.

“I think all of them are gay. They’re just too far in the closet to admit it.”

“Wish you had told me that when I was in high school. It would have made my life so much better.”

“Did you spy on guys in changing rooms?” Gerard smiled, taking yet another photo of him. “I bet you stole glances, didn’t you?”

“Dude, my school had, like, swimming pool classes. It was fucking heaven.”

Gerard lowered the camera and leaned back on his feet. He was laughing and shaking his head, hair flailing wildly around his face, and then he fell back against the opposite armrest and kept snickering, ignorant of Frank’s stern expression. His lip was mostly healed already, Frank noticed, and the bruise on his cheek was starting to gain natural colors, too. The only sign of the beating ever taking place was the black eye that was now more yellow and the way he limped around the

apartment. Another couple of days, and he'd be good as new. Frank's stomach tightened at this notion. Would he still need Frank, then?

"Hey, Gee," he asked, tapping his foot against one of Gerard's hips. They were lying facing each other now, legs tangled together and heads on both ends of the couch. Frank still needed to work, but he was too damn comfortable to move for now.

"Hmm?"

"Do you believe in love?"

Gerard cracked one eye open, surprised. "How did you get to this from stealing looks at other guys' junks?"

"Just answer the question, please?"

"You're weird," Gerard pointed out, but there was no bite to how he said it. "I guess I have to, right? I've been in love, so why would I not believe in it?"

"No, I mean… being in love is different than loving someone, right?"

"I guess so, but I still believe in it. I loved Bert," Gerard sighed, shaking his head a little. "As much as I hate to admit it, I did. It was toxic and destructive, but I would have died for him back then. You?"

"I don't know," Frank shrugged. "I always thought stuff like love at first sight was bullshit, right? Because you were just attracted to someone's looks then, not their character, and that's not how love is. But you said you knew with Bert right from the start."

"I think so. Look how it ended, though."

"Not every love has to end tragically," Frank retorted. He thought back to his parents and how much their divorce had touched him when he'd been a child but quickly pushed that thought away. He knew he was right. He didn't think his would end tragically, even if there was a heartbreak to deal with. "I guess it depends on what you expect out of it, really, but some people are made for each other. Travis and his wife are a match made in heaven. It's like they're soulmates or something."

"Do you believe in that?" Gerard wriggled on the couch to get a better look at him. "Do you think there is this one person you're destined to be with?"

"No. There are too many people on this planet. Chances of finding each other would be minimal. Why would fate create soulmates if they could never be together?"

"Maybe fate creates them close to each other," Gerard offered. "But you're right. I don't want to leave things to fate, either."

"Not anymore, you mean."

"I never liked it, it just sort of happened this way. Are all these questions for the biography?"

Frank gazed over to the table where his recorder was, turned off and unplugged, probably not even charged. He could use some of Gerard's words in the book, but he didn't think he would. "No," he shook his head. "It's just a conversation."

“You converse about weird stuff, Frankie,” Gerard grinned, moving again. “Scoot over, would you? I have one more photo to take.”

He squeezed himself next to Frank, then, rolling onto his side. His cheek was hot against Frank’s shoulder, hair tickling his neck and feet knocking together as he stretched. It was a horrible position to take photos in, but Frank only laughed, lowering his arm and pulling him closer. It was their thing now, apparently. They cuddled. Or, Gerard hugged himself to Frank, and Frank was left with a choice to either pull him an inch too close or push him fully away, which wasn’t really a choice to begin with.

“I thought you didn’t want photos of your bruises taken,” he found himself saying when Gerard lifted one of his arms, angling the camera in their faces. “They’re fading, but they’re still there,” he turned his head to gaze at Gerard, placing a gentle hand on his jawline. Gerard’s eyes were wide open, and he caught his lower lip between his teeth when a corner of his mouth curled into a shadow of a smile.

“I don’t,” he nodded. “So don’t move.”

He was nuzzling into Frank’s neck then, his breath hot against Frank’s skin and his hair obscuring his face, and it was perfect. Frank felt his breath hitch in his throat when the smile got pressed to his throat. The kiss was fleeting, barely there, but the shutter clicked quietly just as Gerard’s lips connected with Frank’s neck, and the evidence was indisputable. He pried the camera from Gerard’s hands and switched on the preview, and there it was. He couldn’t see Gerard, not really, but knowing it was him was enough. They looked about as he expected two lovers would – comfortable, one lying on top of the other, a proof of their love in the form of a kiss captured on a photo. Gerard didn’t move away from him to look at it, and Frank tightened his arm around him instinctively.

“You want to see it?” he whispered, leaning his cheek on Gerard’s head.

“No,” Gerard shook his head. “But I do want you to print it out for me along with your favorite from the photoshoot before. You have a printer, right?”

“I do, but why?”

Gerard shrugged minutely and reached over Frank to grab the TV remote from the table.

“Because I want to remember this,” he said. “I want to remember us.”

*

Frank found his living room in shambles on Sunday morning. Gerard was up by the time he had woken up, the blinds in the bedroom pulled tightly closed despite the late hour – almost eleven, according to the clock, a result of Frank working until early morning hours on the biography with Gerard curled next to him on the bed, fast asleep – and whatever it is that had woken him up must have been one of the sounds coming from behind the door. To his credit, Gerard sounded like he was trying to be quiet, but there was a lot of shuffling happening, things being moved, and table legs scratching against the floor, and it was enough to make Frank want to get up. This and the smell of coffee that filled the entire apartment. Frank had figured out that Gerard always made too much for both of them, but it was never going to waste.

As he emerged from the bedroom a minute or so later, hair in disarray and still in nothing but his pajama pants, he found Armageddon there. The couch had been moved from its central place in the room and was currently pushed against the wall next to Frank's desk, the coffee table leaning against it. The chairs from around the table and the desk were near the balcony door, leaving only a narrow path for Gerard to be able to walk outside and smoke – even though Frank had already told him it was fine if he wanted to smoke inside, it wasn't like he particularly cared – and the carpet had been dragged into the middle of the room from underneath the TV cabinet.

Frank froze in the doorway to the bedroom. His first instinct was to panic. It didn't look like someone had turned the flat inside out with any malevolent intent, but what did Frank know about drug lords? Maybe they liked to stack chairs on top of each other after brutally murdering someone in a bathroom. But no, Gerard was there too, a wide grin plastered on his face and a cup of coffee in hand, looking about as disheveled as Frank felt. His cheeks were rosy, a blush of exertion covering his skin, and he rocked slightly back and forth on his feet as if he couldn't contain his excitement. He wasn't dressed like Frank had expected him, either. He was in a pair of shorts and a loose t-shirt with his hair pinned back into what resembled a tiny ponytail.

"Frankie! You're up, finally," if possible, he grinned even wider. "Help yourself to a cup of coffee, and then we can begin."

"What the fuck is going on?"

"Coffee first," Gerard was on him in seconds, grabbing his shoulders and turning him around to face the kitchen. Frank noticed that his ankle seemed much better as he pushed Frank forward a little. "I need you to be energetic. Lots and lots of energy."

"What the fuck for?" Frank craned his neck to look at him. Gerard looked a little like a madman now, pupils blown with that maniacal smile on his face, and he was shaking as if he was too caffeinated for his own good. "Gee, what have you done to my living room?"

Gerard didn't respond immediately. He busied himself with pouring coffee for Frank with his shaky hands, convincing Frank that miracles were real, after all, given how he managed not to spill it all over the kitchen floor in the process. The cup was thrust into his hands, and Gerard looked at him so intensively, and with so little patience Frank just hoped the coffee had been made a while ago and took a big gulp. It wasn't hot, just lukewarm at this point, and honestly disgusting without the added sugar, but it went down fast. He didn't oppose when Gerard poured him another cup, stealing a sip for himself before handing the mug back to him.

"Okay, so the remodeling," Gerard finally started to explain. "I needed space. I'm sorry. I know you're going out of your way here to help me out, and it's only been, like, two days, but I felt like I was going insane. I tried to squeeze in between the couch and the TV even, but that wasn't enough, and once I moved the table out of the way, I figured I could move other things, too. This way, I can make sure you won't hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?"

"You need to change, too," Gerard was nodding solemnly as he grabbed Frank's wrist, leading him back towards the bedroom. Frank didn't even try to argue when Gerard pushed him to sit on the edge of the bed as he sprung the wardrobe doors wide open. "Okay, let's see here. Pajama pants will end up with a disaster, and so will sweatpants, so that's a no," he hummed quietly, hands raking over the hangers. "In the worst-case scenario, you can borrow a pair of my shorts, but that may be— oh, here," he smiled wider. "That will do just fine."

Then, he threw something at Frank, and only by the color did Frank recognize what it was. He

hadn't seen these green shorts for years and had no idea how Gerard even managed to find them in the depths of his closet. He had worn them precisely three times when he had been fifteen years younger and had still thought he could pick up a guy if he had entertained the idea of sports and gym. He frowned, fisting the fabric in his hands, and sent Gerard a skeptical look.

"There's a high possibility that I won't squeeze my ass into these anymore," he warned, but he was already pulling at the hem of his pajama pants to slide them down. "You mind telling me what we're doing now?"

"It won't be an issue if they're a little tight," Gerard waved his hand dismissively. "You want a t-shirt to go with it, or are you staying shirtless?"

"What are we *doing*, Gerard? How am I supposed to answer you if I don't know—"

"Shirtless, then. Cool with me," Gerard smiled wider. "Okay, stand up. Let me see you."

Frank did. The shorts were a little tight but not to the point of being uncomfortable, much to his surprise. They dug into his hips a little more than he remembered and weren't as loose around his thighs anymore, to the point that Frank probably wouldn't wear them out if he was forced to attend gym again, but he could totally rock them at home. They were definitely looser than the ones on Gerard. These looked more like underwear than overwear, really, the black fabric ending at the very top of his thighs and barely below his ass. Compared to them, Frank's shorts were really damn long.

"Gerard, I swear to God—"

"Perfect. Come on, let's go."

He got dragged again, his wrist clasped almost painfully in Gerard's grip, out from the bedroom and into the middle of his once-pristine living room. Gerard stopped as soon as they were on the carpet and grinned even wider, letting Frank go for a second to lean over the table/chair combo and reach Frank's player. Frank hadn't noticed it before but Gerard's phone was close to it and it had been playing music so quietly it was barely audible. Not anymore, though. When Gerard got to it, the song blasted through Frank's apartment perhaps a little too loudly for a Sunday morning – even if it was after eleven.

If Frank had any doubts about what was about to happen after he'd heard the sultry melody, they had all evaporated with the single touch of Gerard's hands on his hips. They were firm, too, unrelenting when Frank squirmed. Gerard turned him swiftly around in a way he shouldn't be able to with a sprained ankle and pressed himself to his back. He didn't need to ask anymore about what was happening. He frowned instead and turned his head to the side, catching a glimpse of Gerard's hair from the corner of his eye.

"You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Gerard laughed, already rocking slightly to the rhythm of the song. "You showed me yours, I wanna show you mine."

"Anyone can do photography, it's all about technicalities. You gotta actually know what you're doing with… this."

"This being dancing," Gerard supplied, and Frank could hear the smile in his voice even if he couldn't see him fully. He swallowed hard, suddenly painfully aware of the fact that he was still very much shirtless and wearing the tightest, shortest shorts he'd ever owned. He couldn't force

himself to look down. There was a real danger of him getting embarrassingly turned on by the look of Gerard's fingers on his hips. "No one knows how to do something until they learn it, Frankie. Some things take faster than others, like photography, for example, but it doesn't mean you wouldn't learn if you gave it a try. You sure look like you'd be good at it."

Frank had to laugh at that. "What are you talking about? Have you *seen* dancers? You know, these tall, lean people with natural grace?"

"I've seen those," Gerard nodded, his forehead knocking slightly against the back of Frank's head as he did. "I also saw many other body types dancing, don't be a discriminating asshole now."

"Discriminating. Funny."

"You'd be great for poles, for example. You have muscles you are probably unaware of because you don't use them much, but they're there. You'd have to work on these," Gerard's hands thankfully slid up from his hips to his arms, gripping Frank's barely existing biceps. "But your thighs are perfect for it."

"Oh my God, we are *not* talking about my thighs."

"Why do you think I put you in shorts?" Gerard laughed. "Seriously, though. You have powerful thighs. You could hold yourself up on a pole, and they wouldn't even tremble."

"What do you want me to do, drag this tall lamp from the bedroom or something?"

"No," Gerard nuzzled into his neck this time, and Frank nearly choked on his tongue when his hands found their way back to his hips. "Just let go and let me lead you."

He turned him around so swiftly that Frank didn't have time to react. There were arms around his neck all of a sudden, Gerard pressing himself closer and guiding Frank's hands to his waist. He whispered something to him – *hold me*, Frank thought, but it made his brain short-circuit, and he wasn't sure if he got the words right. He gripped him gently, mindful of the bruised ribs, and saw a hint of a smile on Gerard's face before he took another step forward, Frank's leg slipping between his.

"Gee?"

"Shh," Gerard cooed, his cheek pressing against the side of Frank's face. His body was rolling; Frank could feel it under his hands, the gentle but apparent sway from one side to the other, hips working along with it. He cocked them a few times, too, and Frank didn't even know he was following him, working along with his moves, before he heard a soft chuckle in his ear. "Good. See? If you have a good partner, it's easy."

He did a full-body wave against him, and his hips slid over Frank's. Frank realized nothing was easy about it, but he held his breath and followed the lead.

"Three steps to the right now," Gerard instructed when his fingers found Frank's, grabbing his hand and pulling it to the side. "Roll your hips a little, come on. Easy steps, yeah? We're gonna do two slow ones and then three faster the other way, okay?"

This, he thought, he could do. At least up until the point when Gerard nudged his other hand, and it went up on its own accord before Frank could stop it, Gerard twirling in his hold and leaning against his chest. It lasted a mere second, maybe less, before he twisted himself the other way again, but Frank was already panting like he'd run a marathon.

“Another three steps, forward this time,” his voice sounded from far away, but Frank complied, hands tight around Gerard’s and getting sweatier by the minute. “And backward, that’s it. Remember the hips.”

And then Gerard was around him again, and Frank’s thigh was between his legs, and Gerard threw him a quick, amused look. “Hold tight,” he whispered, an arm coming around Frank’s neck and digging in before he went down, bringing Frank along. He still felt him – the legs were there, his hips were pressed to Frank’s thigh, and his ribs were beneath Frank’s hands, but he was leaning back.

“Gerard?” Frank’s voice was overflowing with panic. Fuck, if he dropped him now—

“Hold me,” Gerard repeated, and his hips rolled upwards as he bent even further, throwing his head back. The column of his neck was so long like this, pale and inviting, and Frank’s thigh shook when he slid it further out so Gerard could settle on it. He wasn’t sitting on it as much as he was resting, his feet still firmly planted on the floor. Frank held him, and then held him some more, and finally, Gerard snapped his head back and looked straight at him. “Pull me up.”

“What?”

“Pull me up,” he whispered, and Frank was sure he was doing damage with how tightly he gripped his ribs. “One swift move. Pull me in.”

“I can’t, Gerard, what—”

“Now, Frank,” Gerard’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you want me in your arms?”

He moved before he could properly start overthinking it. One of his hands slipped to Gerard’s hip; another gripped at his hair. Gerard’s eyes were still wide open, but they slipped close as Frank hauled him in, twisting them around in the process. Gerard’s hair swished around his face, and then he was right there, a soft smile on his face as he brushed his nose against Frank’s. With one final roll of his body, he slid closer until they were pressed together from knees to chests.

Frank had never wanted to kiss someone this much before.

“See?” Gerard whispered, his voice a warm puff of air against Frank’s lips. “Easy.”

There was nothing he could say to that, so he laughed instead. The moment was broken; he could feel it in the way Gerard’s arms were loosening from around his neck. His hands suddenly felt heavy, and they dropped from Gerard’s hips down to his sides, giving him an escape route. His head was a mess. Adrenaline and arousal were rushing through him in waves, and he couldn’t decide why he hadn’t gone through with it when he had a chance. If there had ever been this one moment he had been waiting for, it had been this.

“I—,” he started, then shook his head and took a big step backward, slipping from Gerard’s hold entirely. He felt cold, strung up too tight. “Fuck. I need a smoke.”

“Not outside,” Gerard’s voice was still quiet, and he still wore that beautiful smile Frank wanted to wipe away with his lips. “You’re gonna catch a cold.”

Frank didn’t give two shits about the cold. He threw Gerard a cautious look and was gone in seconds, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. Fuck. It really was bloody cold, but it was perhaps exactly what Frank needed. He was scared he would combust otherwise.

*

Frank was determined to sleep on the couch that night. By the time he had come back from smoking basically half of the pack and shivering profusely, Gerard had more or less rearranged his living room back to how it had been. Frank had never been more grateful for the idea of binging Lord of the Rings as he had been at that moment, and he had kept a respectful distance from Gerard all throughout the Fellowship of the Ring. When Gerard had snuggled closer during Two Towers, Frank hadn't pushed him away but hadn't wrapped his arm around him, either. He simply couldn't. He had felt like he would have vibrated out of his skin if he had as much as touched Gerard. If Gerard had noticed, he hadn't said anything.

He didn't go to sleep on the couch; of course he didn't. There were things he was willing to risk, but Gerard's comfort wasn't one of them, and the silence between them had already been a dead giveaway that Gerard had taken it too far. He knew it, too, biting at his thumb whenever he looked over at Frank and disappearing into the bathroom to take a shower before Frank could say anything in the evening. He stood in the entrance to his bedroom for the longest time, listening to the sounds of water running behind the wall, and knew Gerard would blame himself if Frank weren't there when he came out. It was Frank's fucking fault, too. No one told him to fall in love with Gerard. He slipped beneath the covers the way he always did, and his stomach tightened just a little at how Gerard's shoulders relaxed when he found him there.

Frank could deal with unrequited feelings, but the teasing gave him a hard time. He did say it himself; Gerard teased people for a living. When a knocking woke him up a few hours later, he was already curled around Gerard as if nothing had ever happened.

"Frank?"

It was the middle of the night, and Frank blinked the sleep away from his eyes as his heart sped up. The knocking came louder, a rapid rattling of a fist against his front door, and Frank suddenly didn't remember if he had checked the locks last night. They had to be locked, they *had* to be, but what if they weren't?

"*Frank?*"

Gerard was gripping his wrists so tightly it hurt. His whole body was tense, and his voice was quiet but high and panicked. He was on his back with Frank draped halfway across his chest, and Frank could hear his heart thumping rapidly next to his ear, speeding up with each loud knock on the door. He wasn't looking anywhere else but at Frank, too, like Frank was his lifeline. Maybe he was, Frank thought. Maybe he was the only thing between Gerard and the world he could never return to.

He wriggled out of Gerard's touch and pushed at his hands. They were clawing back at his forearms and chest in seconds, Gerard's breath speeding up and his eyes darting between Frank's face and the bedroom door.

"Stay here," Frank ordered harshly, trying to get through the fearful haze that settled over Gerard's logic. "Stay and don't make a sound."

"No, no, Frank, you can't go there," Gerard shook his head desperately. "No, please, don't leave __"

“Stay,” Frank repeated, yanking Gerard’s wrists away again. “Be quiet and listen. You know Markus’ voice. If you hear it call the police.”

“He’s gonna kill you, Frank, no, he’s gonna kill you,” Gerard was sitting up now, pulling at Frank’s arms. “Let’s just stay here, please. I can’t—”

“*Gerard*.”

God, were these tears in his eyes? Frank cupped his jaw lightly and forced himself to smile even if his heart was going a thousand miles per hour inside his chest, even though he knew he wouldn’t stand a chance. If Markus was behind the door, he’d be knocked out in seconds. He just hoped these few seconds would be enough for Gerard to get a hold of the police. He was so, so glad he hadn’t gone to sleep on the couch.

“Please,” Gerard all but whined. “Not like this.”

“I’ll be alright, I promise. If you hear *anything* out of the ordinary, call the police.”

He closed his eyes and leaned in, his lips resting on Gerard’s forehead. He kissed him gently, touch lingering as Gerard’s nails dug into his wrists, and for a second, he let himself just be. He loved this man. Whether it was fate, soulmates, love at first sight, or just how loveable Gerard was, he had no idea, but Frank loved him. He squeezed his eyes shut and held him for a second longer, listening to his breathing. He *loved* him. Dying for him suddenly didn’t seem all that scary.

He slipped out of the bedroom as quietly as he could, closing the door behind him. The lights were off, but it would be no trouble for Markus and his men to figure out where to look for Gerard at four in the morning. He should have installed locks on the bedroom door after moving in. He swore under his breath, dragging his feet slowly towards the apartment’s entrance. His hand was on the handle when he realized he could have taken a knife from the kitchen. A lot of good would it do against the guns these crazy fuckers probably had, but it would be *something*. He should have given one to Gerard, too, just in case.

Frank inhaled slowly, then exhaled.

He leaned in, peered through the security peephole, and came face to face with officer Lone.

He didn’t just open the door, he *tore* it open, and his hand was still curled in a fist before he remembered there was nothing to be afraid of anymore. His legs felt like jelly, and he leaned against the doorframe heavily, nearly falling over.

“You crazy motherfucker,” he said, not bothering with how he was technically offending an officer of the law. “You scared the living shit out of us!”

“I tried calling,” Lone scrutinized him with a hint of a smile. “You know, in situations like these, you should really have your phone charged and not muted.”

“It’s four, you dick,” Frank groaned. “Jesus, come in, I guess. I’m gonna get Gerard.”

He ran back to the bedroom, not caring much about Lone. He found Gerard out of bed and in the furthest corner of the room, phone clutched tightly in his hand and eyes so wide it was a miracle they hadn’t fallen out. Frank was absolutely going to murder a police officer in his flat.

“Frank?”

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s just Lone,” he crouched in front of Gerard and pulled him into a hug. He was

so delicate all of a sudden, so fragile and vulnerable, as he let exactly one shiver run through his body before grabbing at Frank's waist. "Dickhead, I swear I'm gonna kill him."

"Are you alright?"

"Me? Fuck, yeah, I'm fucking golden. You look like shit, though, Christ. Can you stand up? I'm pretty sure he didn't stop by for a coffee."

He hadn't. When Frank led Gerard out of the bedroom with a hand on the small on his back, Lone had taken residence by the table and had already spread out his laptop and a few photographs on top of it, having turned on the overhead light as well. He looked awfully comfortable for a guy who had interrupted someone's sleep and had almost given them a heart attack, and Frank decided no coffee was going to be his punishment. It was too damn early for one, anyway, and even Gerard didn't seem to be thinking about it as he inched closer to the files.

"You are a proper asshole. Did anyone ever tell you that?" he asked as he sat down with Frank hovering behind his back. "What if Frank had a gun? He could have shot you through the fucking door."

"Is that how Frank welcomes the guests?" Lone raised his eyebrows. "Should we look into it, Mr. Iero?"

"Fuck off."

"Nice," Lone rolled his eyes at him. "I'm sorry for bothering you at this hour, but I can't wait. We've gone through the recordings, and we got the footage of the assault. We apprehended Jake Holder, and he was very quick to tell us everything he knew," Lone continued, and Frank's jaw clenched upon hearing the name. "But we still need your confirmation, Gerard, that what we see on the video is what happened. We know it's Markus, but unfortunately, I need your confession on tape."

"And the rush is because…?" Frank wanted to know.

"Because I have a team waiting to arrest him the second Gerard confirms it's him," Lone looked almost bored by the exchange, but there was an underlining impatience in his voice. "I have photos, too. Is this him?"

He slid one of the photos over the table towards Gerard. It was of a man who looked to be in his late sixties, with grey hair and a wild look in his eyes. He was smiling widely to someone he had been talking to as the photo had been taken, his front teeth set wide apart and deep wrinkles running down his face. If it wasn't for the clearly high-quality suit he was wearing and a golden tie pin, Frank wouldn't think twice about him if he saw him on the street. He didn't look like a drug lord, a pimp, or a mastermind. He looked like a guy who maybe stood a chance of being accepted into the nearest circus.

Gerard tensed so hard he was like a rock beneath Frank's hands, though, and he pushed the photo away from himself with enough disgust that Frank heard him gag.

"It's him," he confirmed in a tight voice.

"And these guys?" Lone spread more photos on the table. "Do you know any of them?"

Gerard shuddered but leaned over and took a look. He looked like he was going to be sick when he reached over with a trembling hand, fingers sliding across one of the male faces Frank saw in the photos.

“Don’t know his name, but he was one of… us,” he swallowed hard. “I saw him a couple of times when… he was there,” Gerard shook his head, and Frank’s arms came around his shoulders to hold onto him. He couldn’t care less about Lone watching them with a knowing smile when Gerard leaned back into him, the back of his head resting against Frank’s collarbone. Frank snapped his fingers several times, and Gerard complied readily, hands coming up to cup Frank’s forearms. “I don’t know the rest of them.”

“Alright,” Lone nodded. His smile dropped, then, and he turned serious. “I need you to watch the video, too.”

“I… sure,” Gerard shook in Frank’s hold. “Frankie, can you get us some coffee?”

“No,” he knew what Gerard was doing, and he was so not falling for it. All he wanted was to get Gerard as far away from Lone and this entire case as possible, carry him back to his bed if he had to, and shower him with the love he deserved to feel, but he wasn’t going to bail if they really had to go through that video. He didn’t want to see it, but then again, Gerard probably wanted it even less. He turned his eyes on Lone and gestured his way. “Play it.”

“Frank—”

“Shh, I’ll get you coffee afterward,” he promised, pressing a kiss to the side of Gerard’s head. Now that he knew what it felt like to brush his lips against his skin, he never wanted to stop. “Let’s just get this over with first, okay?”

Lone played it, and Frank understood very quickly that Gerard maybe didn't want to spare him the heartbreak as much as he tried to control his anger. The video was grainy, black and white, taken from one of the cameras across from *House*, and it had been cut to present only the abuse. It started right in the middle, and Frank’s stomach tightened when he realized he was looking at Gerard down on his knees, holding his head in his hands. He couldn’t see the blood on the video, but he knew it was there, the streaks of it running down Gerard’s chin. There were four of them. One of them snatched Gerard by the hair and pulled his head back right before the fist of another connected with Gerard’s mouth.

Frank heard a groan and realized he’d made it. Gerard was clawing at his arms now, trying to pull him even closer, but Frank was transfixed. Someone delivered a kick to Gerard’s side in the video, sending him sprawling on the ground, and then another foot pressed his face to the pavement. Gerard’s hands were scratching against it as he tried to pull himself back and crawl away from it, but a shower of fists fell on his side and his head instead, and he went limp after a few solid hits.

That’s when Frank noticed Markus. He was standing to the side with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, watching the assault, and Frank could make out his ugly grin even from a distance. He shook all over and was glad Lone’s laptop was so far away he couldn’t grab it, or he might have thrown it against the wall. The video paused just as Markus approached and pressed his entire weight on top of Gerard’s ankle and Frank could *hear* the cry of pain Gerard had let out at that moment and could feel the tears running down his face.

Lone slid a recorder over the table and pressed play.

“Can you confirm the video you’ve just watched depicts the attack on you?”

“Yes,” Gerard gritted out.

“Can you identify the man who orchestrated it?”

“Yes. I know him as Markus.”

“And is this the same Markus you recognized in the photos I’ve shown you?”

“Yes.”

The recorder was stopped.

“I’m sorry,” Lone dragged a hand down his face as he pulled the photographs closer to himself. “I know this is horrible to watch, but if we are to put this guy behind bars, we needed to hear it from you.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t,” Frank grunted. Lone looked at him, but he lifted his hand and stopped him before he could respond. “But I don’t need to. You have what you need?”

“I do.”

This time when Frank felt Gerard’s hand on his own, he didn’t hesitate and clasped their fingers together.

“Then get the fuck out of my house and make sure this motherfucker is locked up behind sunrise.”

Lone didn’t honor Frank with another look or a complete sentence. He packed the photos and the laptop, obviously annoyed by how right Frank was with the fact that he needed to hurry, and he clasped a heavy hand on Gerard’s shoulder on his way out. Some customary goodbyes were shared and Gerard walked him to the door as Frank slumped down onto the now vacant chair. He felt the anger inside, just waiting for the pin to drop and the rage to explode, and he squeezed his hands into fists, trying to breathe through it. He couldn’t blow up with it. It wasn’t Gerard’s fault, not in the slightest, and it wasn’t really Lone’s fault, either. He was doing his job and making sure they could lock Markus up for good, but the video still opened a latch in Frank he hadn’t known he had.

He felt delirious with it - the need to take revenge for Gerard, the need to hit, bite, kick, and fight. He flinched when Gerard came back and crouched next to him, pressing his forehead to Frank’s thigh.

“I didn’t want you to see it.”

Frank’s hand started carding through Gerard’s hair almost absently. He was still so pissed off that he was vibrating with it, but he wasn’t going to let it affect how he acted with Gerard. He was what was important at that moment, not Frank. Frank could find a way to let go when Gerard wasn’t on the first line of fire.

“I know,” he hummed. “It was necessary for you to see it, though, and I didn’t want you to watch it alone.”

Gerard arched slightly into Frank’s hand and sighed, his breath hot through the fabric of Frank’s pants. “Let’s go back to bed,” he asked in a quiet voice. “Let’s go to sleep.”

“You go,” there was no way Frank was falling asleep. “I think I’ll sit here for a moment.”

“Frankie—”

He wanted to tighten his grip on Gerard’s hair. He wanted to yank his head back, pull him to his

feet and drag him to the bedroom. He wanted to throw him on the bed and fall on top of him, get the aggression and hatred in a way other than punching a drug lord in the face. He let his hand fall instead and closed his eyes when he felt Gerard roll his head to the side and press his cheek to his leg.

“Please, just… I need to calm down.”

“I can help you calm down.”

“No,” it came out sharper than he intended, and Gerard’s head snapped up. Frank sent him an apologetic look and cupped his cheek as lightly as he could, schooling his expression to a kind, albeit tight, smile. “I mean, thank you, but no. You need to rest. Your body is still healing, and you need to sleep. God knows you’ve been through enough.”

“I’ve dragged you through half of it along with me, Frank.”

“You didn’t drag me anywhere. I volunteered to come. And it’s hardly half of it, too. It’s just a tiny percentage of the shit you’ve endured.”

Gerard shook his head, not trying to argue. He didn’t look scared anymore as much as he looked exhausted, and Frank wondered how much of what he saw on his face was still a bruise and how much was the bags under his eyes. He smoothed a thumb over the top of Gerard’s cheek, stomach tightening when Gerard nuzzled into the touch and closed his eyes. The fragility of him returned, the same one Frank had seen before, and he forced himself onto his feet.

“Go to bed,” he said, pulling his hand away. It didn’t skip his attention how Gerard swayed as if he was trying to get closer again. “Please. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Gerard frowned. “But you won’t be here when I’m asleep?”

He was getting too good at reading Frank.

“Sleep, Gee,” Frank shook his head at him and then lied through his teeth. “Everything is going to be okay.”

*

He got dressed with Gerard watching him from the bed, and he felt his eyes on him as Frank walked out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Maybe it was stupid to leave Gerard alone in the apartment, but he was downright suffocating inside. What had once been anger had simmered to a low hum of confusion, and Frank’s keys jingled as he grabbed them with a pack of cigarettes and stepped outside his flat. He made sure to lock up, and halfway down the stairs, he heard the distinctive sound of a chain rattling as Gerard slid it into place, too. *Good*, he thought, even though it meant Gerard was not going to sleep. Frank pushed forward, not allowing himself to dwell too much on the fact that he was leaving him alone, and only breathed in when he was finally outside.

He promised he’d be there when Gerard woke up. He wasn’t going to.

Frank was gone for hours. Once he stepped outside his flat, he realized he didn't want to go back in. At first, he toyed with the idea of going to work as if nothing happened, visiting the office and actually talking to Doug about everything that was going on, but he quickly dismissed it. By the looks of it, Markus would already be in jail by the time he needed to be in the office five days from now, and Gerard could go back home. As much as it pained him to think about it, he didn't have any more arguments to ask Gerard to stay. He wanted him to, fuck, did he ever, but he tried to understand Gerard would like to go home. He had already told Frank he felt like he was going insane. How much longer could it really take before he'd want to flee as much as Frank needed it now?

Travis was his other option, but Travis was busy. Frank didn't know his exact schedule, but he didn't think his friend would appreciate being woken up at five in the morning so that Frank had somewhere to stay for a while. He could tag along to whatever interview Travis was doing that day, help him edit the article, or anything else, but he would be interrupting. This case didn't need anyone else dragged into it. Travis would become a target as much as Frank was, and he couldn't do it to him. To anyone, really, but especially not to the only guy he could call his friend.

In the end, Frank went where this whole circus had begun. He thought he wouldn't remember, but he found Bert's grave just fine. He crouched in front of it, the bench wet and cold from the falling rain, and locked eyes with the letters engraved in stone. Gerard had said he didn't want to be buried here anymore, but where would he end up after dying, then?

These thoughts often scared Frank when he allowed himself to focus on what was coming for them all. He didn't think about death actively, had only started recently with everything Gerard had been telling him, but even then, the notion had seemed far away. He knew Gerard was going to die one day. He wasn't religious enough to believe his soul would see Heaven or some other made-up paradise, so it was simply a case of Gerard being there one day and then disappearing, vanishing forever. He never thought he would end up staring at the letters of his name engraved in the headstone at a cemetery, still not filled up but almost begging to be, and realize how close to fulfilling the prophecy Gerard had been. He had chosen a place for himself, had basically invited death in, and he had almost met his wish. If Markus' guys were more thorough, if they had a better aim…

Frank shook his head. Gerard was alright. He was getting even more alright with each passing day, the bruises fainter, his ankle mending itself back together. In no time, Frank would be reading about his upcoming performances in *House* again, and he would maybe swing by now and then to watch him dance, to remember what they could have had. Gerard wasn't his, and Frank didn't think he ever would be, and as soon as this chapter they found themselves in together was done with, he felt Gerard was going to gravitate away from him. Back to his glorious life as a performer, while Frank would go back to being a simple journalist. Maybe they'd keep in touch for the first couple of weeks, but the contact would die out eventually, and it would be as if they'd never even met. Just two strangers who would acknowledge each other with a customary nod of a head while bumping into each other in grocery stores.

It made Frank sick to think about it. He didn't want to lose him. Not in this way and not in any other.

He wasn't any calmer when he finally decided to head back home. The anxiety gradually rose with each minute he spent away from Gerard, the images of Markus kicking the door in or sending one of his boys to get revenge right before being apprehended made Frank want to run back from the cemetery. He didn't, though. He was too into his head, he understood that much, and the danger was most likely ending. Lone would arrest the fucker today if he hadn't already. They would have him in handcuffs in some locked room far away from phones he could use to contact his buddies.

Gerard could go home as early as the following day, maybe even tonight.

What Frank didn't expect was to find his bags already by the door, so close he would have stumbled over them if he didn't have to wait for Gerard to unchain the door for him. He even had his coat on already, leaving Frank stunned once again.

"I called the cab," Gerard explained slowly, reaching down to pick up a duffle bag from the ground. "It should be here in maybe fifteen minutes, but I can wait outside. It will take me a few trips to get it all downstairs, though, so I would appreciate it if you left the door open for a couple of minutes."

Frank didn't find anything clever to say. "What?"

"I can… you can push it outside the door," Gerard winced.

"No, wait, I'm serious. What the fuck are you doing?"

"Leaving?"

Gerard said it as if he was unsure about it himself. Like the decision had been made, but it wasn't what he really wanted and more what he thought was required of him, the same way he sounded when he had talked about drugs, prostitution, or both. Frank's stomach rolled painfully when he realized that's how Gerard saw it now. He had misinterpreted everything so spectacularly Frank would laugh if his anxiety wasn't currently through the roof. His hand shot out and clasped around Gerard's wrist, tight enough to make him feel it but loose enough that he wouldn't feel trapped.

"Do you want to leave?"

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable anymore."

"That's not what I asked," Frank shook his head. "Do you want to go back home?"

And there it was again, this raw, open vulnerability. "No."

"Then call the cab company and tell them your plans changed," Frank said sternly, reaching over to ease the duffle bag from Gerard's hands. "And go make coffee, would you? I'll get your things back into the bedroom."

He couldn't help noticing that Gerard hadn't packed it all as he was dragging his bags back where, in his opinion, they belonged. The book Gerard had been reading was still on the living room coffee table, and his charger was tucked into the socket by the bed. It didn't look like Gerard had simply forgotten about these things, either, and Frank felt a smile tug at his lips regardless of how exhausted he felt. It felt like a ploy to have a reason to come back, and Frank rubbed his fingers over the cord almost affectionally before tucking it safely under Gerard's pillow. *Gerard's* pillow, because that was what it was now, not just a spare pillow in Frank's bed.

As he returned, the coffee was already waiting for him, and Gerard was tucked in the corner of the couch. He hadn't changed from the clothes he had chosen to wear for the day, the tight jeans still clinging to his legs, and he still looked like he was seconds from bolting through the door. He was staring at the TV, playing some cartoons in the early midday hours of a Monday morning, but Frank was sure he didn't see any of what was happening. He seemed deep in thought, maybe even hurt again. Frank abandoned the mission to sit next to him and sank to his knees, gripping gently at Gerard's boots.

"You wanna tell me what this was all about?" he began, fingers working on the lacing of the left

shoe. “Why would you think you needed to leave?”

Gerard’s foot arched a little like he was trying to pull it back, but he relented under Frank’s stern look and settled the sole on his thigh.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, looking above Frank’s shoulders. “You were pissed off after that video, and you stormed off. I didn’t wanna make you angrier.”

“I was pissed off,” Frank confirmed. “But not at you. I was pissed off at the assholes who did this to you, and seeing it happening like this… well, let’s say I didn’t want to blow up in your face, and I would have if I didn’t go out.”

“I don’t get it. I mean fuck, it wasn’t the greatest thing to watch, sure, but I didn’t think it would get you so worked up.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Frank cocked his head, surprised. “I would have killed them for doing it to you if I had a chance.”

“Don’t say that,” Gerard’s voice diminished to a whisper. “Please, no more violence. I can’t fucking stand violence.”

“I know you can’t,” Frank cooed softly. He slid Gerard’s boot off and grabbed the other, more careful now when dealing with his sprained ankle. It looked significantly better now after all the ointments, cooling gels, and braces Frank had been putting on it, and Gerard had told him it didn’t hurt as badly anymore, but it was still sensitive enough he took extra time to untie the shoe as far as it would go. “But that’s why I had to go. I would never hurt you, but what if I broke a mug or punched a wall? You would have been scared of me then.”

“I would have,” Gerard seemed only to realize it as he said it. “But I’m sick of it, Frank. Sick of being scared, sick of having to depend on you – or anyone else for that matter, and sick of the police, the videos, the hiding. I miss my job. I miss dancing, I miss singing. I miss fucking *living*. This… I don’t know what this is,” he pointed at himself with a grimace. “I don’t know what I am anymore.”

“You’re safe.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be safe,” Gerard shook his head. “Maybe I need to remember what it’s like to live on the edge of the knife.”

“No, you don’t. Don’t fucking say that,” Frank squeezed around Gerard’s calf to emphasize. “Your ankle will be healed in no time, and Markus will be in jail. You can go back to work in a week, Gee, but at least you can be *safe*. You’ve been hurt enough in your life. You don’t need it anymore.”

“What I need is some control. Over anything, at this point, because it feels like I have none. This is why—,” he stopped and finally looked down at Frank, eyes big and tired. “This is why I decided to go. I knew you wouldn’t tell me to get out even if this was what you wanted, so I thought I could make a decision for the both of us.”

“I’m not trying to take your control away,” Frank said quickly. “If this is what you want, then, of course, go. But I would prefer it if you stayed.”

Gerard looked down at him and reached over for him. Frank didn’t have to think about it for too long. Their fingers slid together easily, his tattooed ones fitting perfectly between Gerard’s longer, slimmer ones. He squeezed around them, and it wasn’t exactly a smile he saw on Gerard’s face, but

it was close enough.

“I guess I’ll just have to find a different way to get the control back,” he said quietly and then swallowed hard. “Will you help me with that?”

Frank did smile – a wide, solid grin and relished in how Gerard didn’t even flinch as he moved on top of the couch with him. “Whatever you need, Gee,” he promised and meant it. “Whatever you need.”

*

Gerard’s hands were warm when he fastened the blindfold behind Frank’s head. Each brush of his fingers made Frank’s body tense, every breathy puff of laughter against the side of his neck cranked up to a hundred. He had his hands fisted in the sweatpants over his thighs, trying to stop himself from reaching behind and feeling Gerard – any part of him, it didn’t matter. He heard a quiet *tssk* when he tried to adjust the blindfold, and Gerard’s finger tapped against his wrist.

“You promised,” he whispered, voice low and rumbling.

“In my defense, this isn’t a normal situation for me,” Frank found his voice, but only barely. He felt like he was going to spiral out of control very fast. “I don’t normally have men blindfold me in my living room.”

“I just need the element of surprise,” Gerard chuckled. “If we had a club to work with, I’d have dimmed lights, a curtain, and many other things. You wouldn’t know what hit you.”

“I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t know now either, even without the blindfold,” Frank argued, but he placed his hands back in his lap. He did promise, after all. If this was what Gerard needed to feel in control of something again, Frank would play along. Nicely, too; it wasn’t like he was complaining. “Just… hurry up, would you?”

“Anxious?” Gerard laughed again, brushing his fingers across Frank’s temple in a feather-like touch. “Just relax, Frank. People wouldn’t pay for it if it wasn’t supposed to be fun.”

“So I need to grab my wallet?” Frank asked, rolling his shoulders. When Gerard didn’t reply immediately, he tensed up again, only to hear the sound of a duffle bag zipper opening in the bedroom. He couldn’t believe he had agreed to it. Whatever Gerard had planned – or not planned, he had told him he hardly remembered the choreography, so he’d have to improvise most of it – was probably more than Frank could stand.

The worst part was that he understood that it was just a way to help Gerard overcome whatever mental blockage he was going through. He felt insecure and lost without his job, entirely on Frank’s mercy when it came to pretty much everything. He lived in his flat, ate the food Frank had paid for, slept in Frank’s bed, and smoked his cigarettes. Everything around him was provided by Frank at that moment, and Frank knew he would have hated it if the roles were reversed. It didn’t mean that Gerard wanted to perform for him, though. He wanted to perform for *someone*, and it just so happened Frank was there, and Frank felt horrible about it.

He knew it would happen. The blindfold had already been enough to heighten his senses, and then he heard the unmistakable clicking of heels against his wooden floors, and his mind was gone.

“Normally, the security would tell you these rules,” Gerard’s voice was close again, and Frank flinched so hard it nearly hurt. He had barely noticed the music Gerard had put on, but as it grew in strength, he recognized the song immediately, and his stomach clenched. He knew it intimately; he danced to it just a day prior, after all. “You can watch, but you can’t touch. I can touch you, but your hands stay by your sides unless you wanna slide some dollars to me. Wave them first, so I know it’s coming. Otherwise, I can and *will* slap your hands.”

“So I do need my wallet, after all,” Frank’s voice came out rough. “Shit, Gerard, I’m so out of my depth here.”

“Nah, you’re good. I need to somehow repay you for housing me for a week, anyway.”

“You don’t— *oh*,” there were hands on his thighs, squeezing right above his knees, and Frank felt like he swallowed his tongue. “Yeah, no. Absolutely. You need to repay me, sure.”

“Seriously, just relax,” Gerard turned serious for a moment. “I need to do this for myself, but I want you to enjoy it, too. There won’t be anything rewarding about it if you’re so nervous you’re sick.”

“I’m fine,” Frank waved his hand at him. “Just… just go. I’m fine.”

Gerard moved away quickly, and Frank took a deep breath. He could do it for him.

“Okay, remove your blindfold.”

Frank reached behind his head and pulled at the knot, feeling the fabric slide down his face. Gerard was in front of him where the coffee table would typically stand, now pushed to the side to give him space to move, and Frank absolutely *could not* do it for him.

Gerard’s skin was hidden beneath the suit Frank remembered from his collaborative performance at *House*, the spandex covering every part of him from his wrists down to his ankles. It glistened slightly in the light Gerard had set up, a fabric of Frank’s t-shirt wrapped firmly around the lightbulb to cast a pinkish hue across the room, and it was stretched tightly over Gerard’s thighs, hips, and chest. Gerard was kneeling, knees spread far to the sides, spine arched back to expose his throat, but even with his head tilted like that, the hairband he had tangled in his hair was clearly visible. Two perky, glitter cat ears sat on top of his head, and the tip of his nose was painted black, tiny lines of whiskers caressing his cheeks. From where Frank was sitting, he could just about make out the heels of his boots, too, and his throat went dry as he took them in. They were high; higher than anything he’d ever seen Gerard wear, and so thin there was no way they could support the weight of a human being.

Frank dragged his eyes up to meet Gerard’s gaze and found his eyes hooded, mouth parted in a sigh, and curled up in a smirk. His teeth were just his teeth, but Frank could swear the canines appeared sharper.

“Motherfucker,” he whispered.

Gerard looked at him and grinned, breaking the character for a moment when he flicked his fingers against one of the cat ears on his head. “They sparkle.”

“They sparkle,” Frank deadpanned. “Jesus, Gerard—”

“Shh. No interrupting.”

His hips rolled forward and down, knees sliding from underneath him, and Frank’s throat went dry. Gerard managed to spin in the process, his side to Frank now, and he threw him a sultry look as he

rested his weight on his hands and knees. The curve of his spine was all Frank could see, a gentle wave going from his shoulders to the arch of his lower back and curling into his ass. One of his hands reached forward and back, nails dragging against the floor, and Frank understood it instantly. Pawing, like a real cat. Jesus Christ.

He hunched his shoulders to the beat of the music, kicking his feet at the same time. Frank choked out the breath he didn't even know he was holding when Gerard bent in half, the tips of his heels and his hands pressed to the floor and hips in the air in a perfect inverted V. All physics laws Frank was aware of told him he should have tipped to the side when he started lowering himself to the ground, chest first, but he didn't. His hips worked in a rotation, left to right, left to right, until he settled, leaning against his right hipbone.

He stayed flat against the floor for a beat or two, just wriggling, and then sprung back onto his knees. Frank hadn't even noticed the zippers before, too entranced with how beautiful Gerard looked, how otherworldly erotic. Now that they came down dragged by Gerard's skillful fingers, they looked like beacons of light in the darkness. The golden metal shone in the pink light as Gerard lowered the zippers to his hips.

"Like what you see?" he asked, reminding Frank that it wasn't really Gerard. Not the one he knew to read in his glasses on the couch but the performer, the stage persona, someone who was supposed to take his breath away. Someone, Frank remembered, too, who was doing this for himself, and Frank should sit back and let him. He definitely shouldn't open his mouth and speak or feel the heat gathering between his legs, but he did. God, it was there because Gerard was, apart from being sweet, the hottest thing Frank had ever lain his eyes on.

"Yeah," he answered, fisting the fabric of his sweatpants tightly. There were rules and Frank really, *really* wanted to disobey them.

"Yeah?" Gerard cooed. "What do I look like?"

He slipped the suit from his shoulder as he said it, and Frank was momentarily speechless when he saw the long expanse of Gerard's milky skin. Frank had never considered him muscular, but he had to admit his chest was toned way more than his t-shirts let on. It ran into a soft, perfectly hairless belly and prominent hipbones, stretched to left and right, becoming his ribs and sides, and Frank's mouth was watering.

"Beautiful," he whispered, pressing the palm of his hand hard against his thigh. He felt like a teenager again, eager and willing to stick a hand down his pants at the sight of a stunning man.

"No, Frank," Gerard frowned. "You can call your boyfriend that. What do *I* look like?"

The words were easy to find, but Frank couldn't force himself to say them. The look in Gerard's eyes told him what he was looking for, but it didn't matter that Frank had promised him he would help. He couldn't say that. He couldn't call him a whore. He shook his head when Gerard's shoulders slumped, and suddenly it wasn't erotic anymore. A shadow of evident anger and hurt crossed Gerard's face and then gave way to more determination than Frank remembered seeing in him before.

"Go on, just tell me," he said firmly and rolled his hips deliberately forward. Frank didn't budge, stopping himself from looking down. "Tell me I'm a whore."

Frank winced and recoiled when Gerard moved forward on his knees, his suit dropping lower and pooling around his hips. "No. You're beautiful."

“No, I’m not. I’m a whore,” Gerard’s voice was shaking when he said it, eyes squeezed shut. His hands were working against the zippers almost frantically at this point, pulling at them so hard he had managed to get them stuck. He groaned in frustration and yanked them again, managing to dislodge them at last. “How do you not see it? *Look at me!*”

Frank did. The suit parted on both sides of his thighs, revealing more of Gerard’s skin than Frank had ever seen. His hands were shaking when he ripped it away from his body and when he looked up, the hairband was crooked on his head, and there were tears in his eyes. Frank noticed other things, too – the lace panties Gerard had on, obviously meant to allure and turn men on, which now looked almost pathetic as Gerard dug his fingers into his thighs right below them. The trembling of his legs as he dragged himself up, heels wobbling dangerously as he took a step forward. The way he shook all over when he looked at Frank through his tears.

“See?” he choked out. “This is what I’m good for. A cheap whore for men to jerk off to, wishing they could bend me over and fuck me. You want to do that, too,” Gerard all but spit the words out. “And you know what? I’d fucking *let* you.”

“Stop,” Frank whispered. “Gerard, don’t—”

“You want it? I’d really let you,” he turned around then and bent over, the lace stretching tight over his ass. “Go on, there are no rules. There were never any rules,” Gerard whispered, and his head fell between his shoulders as he uttered. “Come on, Frank. Fuck the whore.”

Frank didn’t know he could make the sound that slipped past his lips. His hands shot out, grabbing at Gerard’s hips so hard it had to hurt, and he hated it – hated the relieved, pained sob that left Gerard’s throat when he thought he got what he had wanted. Frank didn’t even have to get up from the couch, that’s how close to him Gerard was. He tightened the hold and spun him around harshly, pulling him in simultaneously. Gerard yelped when his heels bent, and he sprawled on top of Frank’s chest, knocking the breath out of him.

Frank didn’t care. His sternum exploded with pain when an elbow connected with it, and he sucked a breath through his teeth but didn’t stop moving. He mentally congratulated himself for always having blankets lying around everywhere and unfolded one as quickly as he could, just as Gerard managed to lift his head and look down at him. He looked wrecked. The painted-on whiskers were now running down to his chin, washed away with his tears, and he was shaking so violently that his teeth were knocking together. Frank threw the blanket over his shoulders and closed it firmly over his chest.

“No,” he said firmly when Gerard sobbed again. He reached over and cupped his cheek, brushing the tears away from his skin. “No, you’re not a whore, Gerard. You’re fucking beautiful.”

“Stop it, stop it, stop—”

“Beautiful,” Frank repeated. When Gerard swung at him, he caught his wrist easily and pressed it to Gerard’s chest, tilting his body back. “Come here. You’re okay. You’re going to be okay.”

“Fuck off, no,” Gerard yanked his hands, trying to slip from Frank’s grip. He tightened his fingers and shook his head, and Gerard growled at him. “Fuck you, Frank. *Fuck* you. I fucking *hate* you.”

“Shh, Gee, stop it. Come here.”

“Fuck you!”

He caught Gerard’s gaze and held it, waiting for the anger to subside, for *his* Gerard to come back.

He saw it happen in real time, the film of red that had been blinding him replaced with evident, obvious agony. When he let go of his wrists, Gerard's fist connected with his chest, but it was a weak throw, so poor Frank barely felt it.

"Come here."

Gerard's lower lip quivered. "Fuck you."

"Sweetheart."

A wretched cry filled the room, and then Gerard was leaning into him, folding in his arms, hiding his face in Frank's neck and curling his hands behind Frank's neck. He was still trembling when Frank hugged him, and he rocked them both softly from left to right, hands firm on the back of Gerard's head and his lower back. He smoothed the blanket he found there, and Gerard collapsed further, knees finally bending.

"Frank— Frank, *please*—"

"Shh, I've got you," Frank shushed him gently. His own eyes were filled with tears and he knew they'd fall the second he'd see Gerard's face again, so he held onto him tighter and hid his face in his hair. "God, you're so fucking precious. The best goddamn thing that's ever happened to me," he whispered into Gerard's ear. "You're so strong, my love, so brave. You're so fucking beautiful."

"Oh, *God*."

"I won't let anyone hurt you again," Gerard sniffled, and Frank closed his eyes tightly, pressing a kiss to his neck. "Never again. I'll keep you safe."

When Gerard leaned back to look at him, his eyes were wide open. He searched Frank's face for something – what, Frank didn't know – and then curled his fingers into the front of his t-shirt when his lower lip quivered again. "Why?"

Frank could list a thousand reasons, but none of them sounded like what he wanted to say. He brushed Gerard's hair gently away from his forehead, curled it behind his ear, and cupped his face again. Gerard's eyelids fluttered, and he went easily when Frank pulled him closer, pressing their forehead together. He remembered this from when they had danced together, Gerard's body warm and firm beneath his palms, his smile wide, and pride beaming off of him. He wanted to see that smile again and hear Gerard's genuine, soft laughter ringing through the room instead of his sobs.

His nose brushed against his, Gerard's warm exhale landing on his lips.

"Gerard," he asked. "Can I kiss you?"

And there it was – the softest of chuckles but a chuckle, nonetheless, and Frank's sternum hurt with something different than a forming bruise now. It ached with love.

"Yeah," Gerard breathed. "Please."

Frank caught Gerard's lower lip between his own as gently as he could. It fit there perfectly for a second, resting and still quivering slightly until Gerard released a relieved moan and kissed him back. Frank held his face between his hands and let Gerard kiss him, their lips sliding slowly together, never parting his. He didn't need to. Gerard's lips were chapped and warm, dry but tender, and Frank angled his head and reveled in it, holding onto him. He could die, he thought. Right here, right now, with Gerard shaking in his hold and kissing him like it was the only thing he

needed, Frank could die, and he'd die a happy man.

When Gerard moved back, the tears had stopped. Frank caught a glimpse of a smile before Gerard hid his face in the crook of his neck.

"You're going to be okay, sweetheart," he said again.

For the first time, Gerard nodded. He finally believed him.

*

Lone called this time, rousing Frank from sleep at another stupidly early morning hour. He grunted, blindly looking for his phone on the nightstand and cursing himself for ever getting involved in a case that robbed him of his beauty sleep, and then tensed immediately when he saw the name. He stole one glance at the clock – seven in the morning, so maybe not so early, after all – and took a deep breath before answering.

"What?" he grumbled.

"Good morning to you, too," Lone sounded tired right off the bat, and Frank realized he had probably been up since seeing them last morning. "You have Gerard anywhere near you? I've got news."

That worked much more efficiently at waking Frank up. He craned his neck and found the pressure on his chest to not be anxiety but another body, Gerard snuggled close to him with his hair falling over his face. He was awake; Frank could tell by the twitching of his fingers against his stomach and the barely visible slide of his hand up and down his chest. He grinned and switched the phone to the other hand to tangle his fingers in Gerard's hair. "Yeah, Gerard's here."

Gerard lifted his head at the sound of his name. He caught Frank's gaze and smiled, stretching minutely to press himself firmer to his side. He looked adorable, Frank had to admit. With sleep still clinging to him and making his eyelids appear heavier, eyes hooded, and the messy hair around his face, he was perhaps more beautiful than he had been in spandex on his knees. Frank felt one of his legs brushing over his, knee bending so he could hook his foot behind Frank's calf. Frank's fingers slipped from his hair and traveled down over Gerard's naked shoulders and spine until they rested just above the black lace of the panties he had never had a chance to take off.

"Figured he would be," Lone laughed. Frank could imagine him shaking his head at them. "You need some bonus points there? Wanna be the bearer of good news?"

"Fuck you and your points," Frank barked back but laughed, nonetheless, when Gerard cocked an eyebrow in a silent question. "But yeah, totally. Let's hear it."

Lone seemed like he wanted to say something else, maybe something about how Frank had clearly just woken up and had picked up a phone in bed, and yet Gerard was still next to him, or perhaps something about the points again, Frank honestly couldn't tell. He heaved a sigh instead, abandoning his mission to make Frank blush – and Frank had to really reevaluate his life if he was buddies with a police officer now. How did that happen?

“We got our hands on Markus yesterday evening,” Lone said slowly. “He mostly came without putting up a fight and was very confident we wouldn’t have anything on him. Needless to say, he was a little surprised when I showed him the video.”

“Oh? And did he have something to say about that?”

“Not much. He isn’t stupid, Frank. He’s actually a pretty intelligent guy, having pulled off this drug-dealing business for so long. He saw his face on the screen and asked for a lawyer.”

“Of course he did.”

“We know this guy, though. We had the dubious pleasure of crossing him a couple of times in the past. He’s a tough son of a bitch, but he also knows a lost case when he sees one,” Lone continued. “He probably wanted to argue Markus didn’t touch Gerard at first, but thankfully for us, the asshole also sprained his ankle right there on the video, so there’s that.”

“Thank God for small mercies,” Frank spit out with more venom than he intended. Gerard’s brows creased at that, so he tightened the hold he had on his waist, digging his fingers in. He was supposed to deliver good news, not stress Gerard out first thing in the morning. Only when Gerard relaxed back into him, body going pliant against Frank’s, did he continue. “So what happened?”

“They asked to speak alone, and after about twenty minutes, the lawyer went out and asked us what we could offer them.”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“We talked about it, Frank,” Lone sighed. “Taking a deal is Markus’ best choice – and his name isn’t really Markus, by the way. It’s just Mark.”

“Pompous fucker.”

“He is. So Mark’s best chance is a deal, and we need Gerard to confirm he agrees to it, too. I would not recommend taking it to court, as I’ve already said, but ultimately it’s up to Gerard at this point.”

“What deal are we talking about?”

“Eight months in jail and about twenty thousand to pay Gerard for the physical injury he suffered. I know it doesn’t sound like a long time, but it’s only temporary. We’re working on the warrant to search his house as we speak, should be done in a few days. We’ll nail him for pimping for maybe four to five years afterward, and if we can prove drugs, then we’ll go for life.”

“Life?” Frank’s voice came out as a whisper.

“If what Gerard told us is true, and I’m sure it is, then it’s a serious drug trafficking business. That’s at least twenty years, but given how long it’s been going on, we’ll try to lock him up for good.”

“And if you don’t succeed?”

“The worst that can happen is he’ll get twenty for this and four for pimping. That’s still twenty-four years of peace for Gerard.”

Frank turned his head, meeting Gerard’s gaze again. Twenty-four years was a lot. It was a lifetime, really, more than half of what Frank had already lived through, and that was assuming Markus would even make it that far in jail. He had to be older than Gerard by a good decade or more, so

there was a fair chance he would never see the outside world again and rot away inside the prison walls. Frank allowed himself to smile when he saw the hopeful look on Gerard's face and stroked his fingers over the warm skin beneath his palm.

"I get it," he said. "How much time does he have to decide?"

"Oh, loads. We can still hold him for," there was a pause, Lone most likely gazing at his watch. "Thirteen hours without further transfer. If the transfer happens, it isn't a big deal, but I would prefer to be done with the deal before it. Tell Gerard not to hurry, but he should really give me his answer in twelve."

"Sure," Frank nodded. "We'll call you back, alright? Thanks, Lone."

"It's officer Lone for you, Iero," Lone replied, but there was amusement in his voice as he said it. Frank shrugged and grinned.

"Whatever you say, dude."

Putting the phone away, he stretched his body and relaxed into the pillows. This was good news. Fantastic news, really, and he couldn't wait to tell Gerard all about it. With or without the deal, Markus was now locked up and in no position to cause Gerard any more harm, and the relief that flooded Frank was unspeakable. He was *safe* now. He could go outside the flat, he could go back to work, he could live again, the thing he had wanted ever since Markus' men had thrown their first punch. At the same time, it also felt like they were currently punching Frank. The freedom Gerard gained with Markus going to jail meant he would be gone. Frank's smile was gone when he looked down at him again, and the kicking in his guts intensified.

This was what Frank had imagined all these days before when he had seen Gerard perform. Maybe they didn't own an apartment in a skyscraper and were stuck in Frank's shitty little flat miles away from the center, but it still felt like his dreams were coming true. Gerard had kicked the comforter away from himself and was now lying on top of Frank's white sheets, just miles and miles of his pale skin with the black lace contrasting against it and the covers. He had a slight smile on his face like he was genuinely happy to be there, and his eyes were closed in a display of indisputable trust he had put in Frank. He didn't look uncomfortable or scared anymore. He looked like he belonged there, in bed with Frank, with the morning sun slithering through the curtains and grazing his skin, and Frank wanted to keep him there forever.

He considered lying, even – just for a second. If he told Gerard the case was still ongoing, if he told him Markus had escaped… but he couldn't, he wouldn't. He watched his fingers flex against Gerard's slim waist for a moment before he spoke up.

"They have him," he was surprised at how rough his voice sounded and how it quivered. "Caught him last night, and he's locked up now. They have a deal ready, they just need your approval, and it's a go."

"Mm," Gerard hummed against his chest. His hand, so far immobile in the center of it, started stroking down to Frank's stomach and slowly back. "Would you approve it if you were me?"

"The deal? Yeah, I think so. It's—"

"I don't want to know," Gerard interrupted him. "Text Lone and tell him I'm saying they should go for it."

"What? No, Gerard, you don't even know what they're offering him."

“And like I said, I don’t want to know. You’re saying it’s good, so it must be good. Text him.”

“Jesus, Gee,” Frank could feel his heart speeding up under Gerard’s palm. “No, you… it’s your life. Why would you let me make such decisions for you?”

“That’s why,” Gerard’s eyes opened for a moment, and he looked at him, determined. He tapped against Frank’s chest a couple of times and then settled against it again, cheek pressed right below Frank’s right collarbone. “You think it doesn’t matter. It’s probably nothing for you, like a fucking… everyday occurrence or something. But I’ve never had it before.”

“It?”

“This,” Gerard waved his hand. “Waking up with someone and actually remembering where I am. Having *them* know who I am instead of being drugged out of their mind. The fact that I can be here like this,” he pointed at his body, Frank’s gaze following. “And not be afraid of you taking advantage of me. Do you think Bert would have stopped yesterday if he saw me how you saw me? Because no, Frank. He wouldn’t have.”

“Sweetheart—”

“That, too,” Gerard pointed at him. “No one has ever called me a sweetheart before. I’ve earned myself many nicknames, a whore, a slut, a cum-dumpster a few times,” he listed and smiled when he saw Frank wince at that. “Never a sweetheart. When you said yesterday that you were out of your depth… well, so am I now. But it’s nice, Frankie. I— I could get used to this.”

“You can.”

“It’s scary, too,” Gerard shook his head a little and frowned. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what you’re offering, and I want it to be what I think it is, I really fucking do, Frank, but… you saw what happened yesterday. I’m a mess. I don’t think you could ever want such a fuck-up in your life.”

“Well, tough shit, because I do,” Frank said sternly. “And you’re not a fuck-up, Jesus. You’ve been beaten up to a pulp by a drug lord who used to abuse you. I think anyone would have a breakdown, but look at you now. A moment of weakness is not fucking up. A thousand moments of it aren’t fucking up, either.”

“What are they, then?”

“Trying your goddamn best.”

Gerard tensed a little and then sighed and slid an inch closer. Frank’s hand roamed freely over his back now, slow and steady to not scare him away but also firm to show him exactly what it was that he wanted. It was a lot of things – Gerard’s smile in the morning, his comfort, the relaxed line of his shoulders. His body, too, but Frank had priorities. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to the top of Gerard’s head.

“I’m gonna ask you something now,” he warned, feeling the anxiety swooping through his chest. “And I want you to be honest about it, okay? It will only work if you’re honest with me.”

“I’ve always been honest with you.”

“Do that one more time,” Frank asked. “I want us to be something, Gee,” he confessed next. “I’ve wanted you pretty much since the moment I saw you on that stage, but the more I learned about you, the more I figured I wanted more than just this,” he tapped against Gerard’s hip and felt

Gerard smile next to his skin. “I mean, *fuck*, I want that too, but mostly I want to see you happy. I don’t know if I can be what makes you that way, but I will surely try. If you want it, I’m here. And I’d like you to be here, too.”

Gerard laughed a little, shaking in his hold. “You know, ‘will you be my boyfriend’ would have sufficed.”

“Fucker,” Frank gritted through his teeth. “Will you, though?”

Gerard lifted his head from his chest and looked at him for a few seconds as if he was evaluating if Frank would do. He was smiling still, a deep, genuine smile, and Frank’s heart fluttered when he sighed and stretched his body further. His arms folded over Frank’s pecks, and he rolled his hips until he could settle his legs on both sides of Frank’s thighs, splaying himself on top of him. In any other situation, with any other man, Frank would gasp and try to throw them off. Feeling the weight on top of his stomach and chest usually gave him panic attacks, the sudden pressure pushing air out of his lungs. This, though – this was different. His hands reached back for Gerard’s waist, squeezing hard, and Gerard all but purred when he arched into his palms.

“Mm, as long as you keep touching me like that, the answer is yes.”

Butterflies. God, Frank couldn’t remember the last time he had felt butterflies in his stomach.

“What about kissing?” he teased.

“Kissing just sweetens the deal,” Gerard nodded solemnly. His hair tickled Frank’s cheeks as he hovered above him and bit his lower lip. “We could both use some sugar, don’t you think?”

Frank did think just that. He grinned when Gerard leaned into him and kept smiling when they kissed, lips sliding together so easily as if they had been doing it their whole lives. He forgot all about texting Lone for a moment, about a criminal waiting for Gerard’s decision, about the fact that they still needed to figure out so many things. He closed his arms around Gerard’s middle, pulling him in, and that was enough for the time being. He didn’t need to think about anything as long as Gerard kissed him.

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Frank’s hands moved from Gerard’s waist to his hips as he tilted his head back. Gerard kept kissing him, tiny pecks of lips traveling from his mouth down to the side of his neck and back to his jaw. He nibbled at it gently, and Frank sighed, fingers digging into the delicate bones he found beneath his palms.

“Did you text Lone?” Gerard whispered into his ear. He caught Frank’s earlobe between his lips and pulled it between his teeth, making Frank’s toes curl.

“Fuck, don’t talk about Lone now,” he whined. “We have— *fuck*— we have twelve hours still.”

“Maybe, but I’d feel much more relaxed if I knew it was done,” Gerard chuckled as he rolled his hips slowly on top of Frank’s lap. It made Frank’s fingers dislodge, and they fell further down, catching against the lace. His breath hitched in his throat. “Don’t you want me to be relaxed?”

“You play dirty.”

“You know it,” Gerard laughed harder. “I’m great at teasing, remember?”

Frank smiled despite himself. He forced his eyes open, and his gaze immediately fell on Gerard’s parted mouth. The way he was staring down at him, slightly amused and also highly impatient, made the muscles in his stomach tighten. All he wanted to do was thrust his hips up and knock Gerard off balance so he could have him pressed tightly to himself, but Gerard did know what he was doing. He kept a safe distance between their bodies, barely a few points of touch where his thighs enveloped Frank’s hips and his feet hooked over his calves.

Frank couldn’t stop looking at him. He let go of one of his hips and blindly reached over to the bedside table, gaze still locked with Gerard’s. It made Gerard grin, small wrinkles forming next to his mouth and eyes.

“Stop laughing at me, asshole,” Frank groaned. He grazed the edge of his phone and grabbed it almost desperately, only throwing one quick look at it to type in the password and open the chat with Lone.

“Oh, so I’m an asshole now? What happened to sweetheart?”

Deal is a go.

“You can be both,” Frank threw his phone away, not caring much where it landed and reached immediately for Gerard’s hips again. “I’m sure you’re great at multitasking.”

“Depends,” Gerard straightened his back and spread his knees further. When he was like this, each forward roll of his body made him rub lightly against the very obvious tenting in Frank’s sweatpants, causing him to hiss. “I can’t talk and suck you off at the same time, for example.”

“*Jesus,* Gerard.”

“But I can try. Would you like me to?” Gerard smiled lazily, cracking one eye open to stare down at him. “I bet you’d love it, hearing me slur *please* and *thank you* with my mouth around your cock.”

“Oh my God, stop talking,” Frank shook his head roughly. Gerard burst out laughing and leaned back to kiss him, ignorant of how Frank’s head was spinning and his hands twitched on his naked skin. Instincts were taking over, and he was trying very hard to fight them, reminding himself over and over that he was a gentleman and he wouldn’t push Gerard into something he wouldn’t want.

“Come on, Frank, move your hands,” Gerard read his mind effortlessly. “I know you want to touch me.”

“I don’t—”

“I want you to,” Gerard cooed, placing a chaste kiss on Frank’s open mouth. “Go on.”

The lace stretched when Frank snuck his hands beneath the hem and scratched the top of his wrists as he gripped Gerard’s naked ass and squeezed. Gerard gasped into his mouth, hips rocking down without control. It turned into a long, drawled moan when Frank kneaded at the flesh he found there and pulled him roughly in, bucking his hips up. Their cocks slid together through the fabric and he sucked the air through his teeth.

“Fuck, you’re gonna be the death of me,” he panted when Gerard set a slow, almost lazy rhythm and began rocking his hips repeatedly into him. “You’re so fucking hot.”

“Yes, finally,” Gerard murmured. “What do you want? Do you want me to suck you? Do you want me to ride you? You can have anything you want, Frankie. I’ll give it to you.”

Frank thought about it to the best of his abilities. He wanted it all. The idea of Gerard’s plump lips stretched around his cock shot a spark of pleasure down to his toes, but so did the mental image of Gerard on his knees, trembling and begging for it with his head pulled back by Frank’s hand in his hair. But it was still Gerard, and Frank wanted more than any bodily pleasure to make *him* feel loved. He grinned when he saw Gerard’s eyebrows rise and his movements faltered.

“What?” he asked. “Don’t you want to—?”

“Oh, baby, I do want to,” he promised, pulling Gerard forward to show him how badly he wanted him. “But not right now.”

“Then what— *ugh*.”

Frank flipped them over effortlessly, Gerard’s back hitting the mattress with a muffled gasp and legs splaying wide for Frank to settle between them. His eyes were wide when he gazed up at Frank, temporarily lost and confused, and Frank pressed him into the mattress with his hips. “You’re my precious little thing,” he whispered, mirroring Gerard’s previous action and nibbling at his jaw. “I take care of my things.”

“Frank?”

“You just lie there and look pretty,” Frank winked, moving back temporarily to tear his t-shirt over his head and throw it over the edge of the bed. “And I’ll make you feel good.”

Gerard shivered, mouth opening to say something more. He groaned instead when Frank lowered his mouth onto his chest. He planted soft pecks across his collarbones and sternum, but they turned into open-mouthed, wet kisses when he descended further. His lips closed over Gerard’s left nipple and he sucked, his teeth grazing it as he withdrew. He hummed with satisfaction when Gerard gasped, thumbing at his lower lip. When Gerard caught it with his teeth and pulled it into his mouth, Frank’s cock throbbed in his sweatpants. He was so hard he ached with it, but so was Gerard.

His cock strained against the black lace of his panties when Frank moved lower, sucking bruises into his pale thighs. It looked obscene like this, the head barely contained by the tight fabric, and Frank’s mouth watered as he gazed at it. He didn’t have to think about it; his lips closed over it through the panties, and Gerard’s hips jumped from the bed as he moaned, clawing at Frank’s shoulders.

“Frank, *fuck*—”

“Shh, sweetheart,” he breathed out, the warm air hitting Gerard’s cock, making his thighs tremble. “God, look at you. So fucking beautiful.”

He rubbed circles into Gerard’s hipbones, playing with the edge of the lace as he moved his mouth over his length. Gerard was panting hard when he hooked his fingers under the hem of it and pulled. There was a hiss, and then Gerard was kicking his legs out, desperate to get rid of the fabric and nearly knocking Frank out with his knee. He laughed, pressing his hands firmly to his thighs and immobilizing him against the bed.

“Please, please, fuck, Frank, *please,*” Gerard mumbled, head thrown back and eyes squeezed shut. “Oh my God, please—”

“Don’t worry,” Frank smiled as he leaned and closed his fist around Gerard’s cock. He had him convulsing on the mattress as he squeezed lightly and then almost sob when Frank licked a wet stripe from the base to the tip. “You don’t have to beg me for it, baby.”

“Fuck, but I might anyway,” Gerard groaned, one of his hands finally finding Frank’s hair and gripping it tightly.

Frank would have answered, but he thought it was better just to show him. He went down, pressing a kiss to the head of Gerard’s cock and flicking his tongue out to tease the slit. The hand in his hair tightened, and he hummed, pleased, opening his mouth wider. He had always loved it, but it was so much better when it was Gerard. His cock filled Frank’s mouth perfectly, lips stretched around his girth, making his eyes water and his throat constrict around the pressure. He wrapped a firm hand around the base and started bobbing his head slowly, sucking his cheeks in as he went up and working his tongue as he swallowed.

“*Frank*, fuck, wait—”

Frank pulled back immediately. He gasped, trying to remember what words were. Gerard hadn’t pushed him away; his hand was still tangled in his hair, but a look of deep concentration on his face gave Frank pause.

“Sweetheart, are you okay?”

“Oh God, yeah,” Gerard laughed, throwing an arm over his eyes. “You could make me come like this in under a minute, but I really, *really* want to come on your cock.”

The knot in Frank’s stomach tightened so much he choked on it. “Fuck, babe—”

“That’s the idea,” Gerard hummed, nodding. “Come on, please. Tell me you have lube.”

Much to his surprise, he did have lube. He couldn’t remember the last time he had slept with anyone in his apartment but the bottle was there, pushed to the very end of his bedside table drawer, almost entirely full. He checked the expiration date just in case, making Gerard giggle and kick him in the hip impatiently. His wrist got gripped tightly when he reached back to the drawer to scour for condoms.

“No,” Gerard shook his head firmly. “I trust you, and I want to feel you.”

Frank had never shut the drawer faster in his life.

“Stay like this,” he murmured when Gerard wriggled beneath him. He caught his gaze and smiled, placing a small kiss on one of Gerard’s knees before spreading his legs further apart with his palms. He saw Gerard swallow hard and a shiver rippled through him as he lifted his hips from the bed almost shyly. Frank fit a pillow underneath him, opening the bottle with one hand while the other stroked Gerard’s hip. “When was the last time you did it?”

“Got fucked in general or got fucked face to face?”

“Both.”

“Around two years in general, but you know. Mikey wasn’t exaggerating when he said I had toys in the house, so you don’t have to be too careful,” he winked but blushed all the same. “But like this? I don’t think I’ve ever done it like this.”

Frank poured lube all over his fingers and leaned over Gerard, balancing his weight on one elbow

as he sneaked a hand between his legs. “You can’t be serious,” he frowned. Gerard sighed, arching slightly to kiss him between the eyebrows.

“No one ever wanted to see me.”

“Lucky for you, you’re all I ever want to see,” he whispered. Gerard’s mouth opened in a moan, and his eyelids fluttered when Frank pushed the first finger inside him. “Yeah, just like that. So pretty like that.”

“More, Frankie, please.”

“Slowly,” Frank scolded as he crooked his finger gently. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t care,” Gerard whined. His fists were clenched tightly around the sheets, thighs trembling as he tried to hook his legs higher. “I need to feel you, please— *oh fuck*.”

“See?” Frank smiled at him, pushing his two fingers deep inside him. Gerard was tight, but he was opening up fast, throaty little moans escaping him with each thrust of Frank’s fingers inside him. Frank knew what he was doing, though. He knew Gerard needed some pressure, some pain, to remind him Frank wouldn’t hurt him actively, so he leaned back onto his feet and pushed at his thigh, opening him up. “You’re doing so well, though. You want me to fuck you like this?”

“Oh God, please,” Gerard nodded, a thin layer of sweat gathering on his skin. Frank didn’t have to do much. Gerard’s hips were already rolling, lifting from the pillow as he grunted and meeting his fingers with each slide. Frank couldn’t tear his eyes away from it, from how his tattoos disappeared inside and how Gerard took him in so eagerly and willingly.

He flicked his wrist and pushed his fingers down. Gerard’s eyes snapped open, and a guttural groan left his throat, hands pawing at Frank’s forearms. He wasn’t trying to push him away, though. When he got a grip on Frank’s wrist, he held it in place and bared his throat, fucking himself on Frank’s fingers.

“Jesus Christ,” Frank whispered. “Okay, okay baby, you can have it,” he pulled his hand back, and Gerard downright sobbed, chasing after him. “Patience, sweetheart.”

“Fuck your patience,” Gerard spat out, and Frank laughed when he launched forward and yanked at his sweatpants. “Take them off, fucking— fuck, Frank, take them off.”

“Ouch, careful,” he hissed. Gerard didn’t listen, tearing at the fabric until it gave under his hands and slid down Frank’s thighs. He was already so hard it hurt, a wet patch on the front of the grey fabric leaving nothing for the imagination, and Gerard’s eyes shone as he finally undressed him. Frank would have laughed again at how he licked his lips, slowly and deliberately, but the gesture went straight to his guts like an electric shock. He had to press a hand to Gerard’s chest to stop him from curling forward. “Later, love. Lie back down for me.”

“Please, please, please,” Gerard mumbled as Frank positioned himself on top of him, pressing the front of his thighs almost to his chest. “Please, Frank, I wanna feel you so badly. I need you inside me, please—”

He stroked himself a couple of times, each slide of his lube-covered hand making him shiver. He guided his cock to Gerard’s hole and pressed against it, listening to Gerard’s breath getting stuck in his throat. “Look at me,” he asked softly. Gerard’s head snapped to the side immediately, eyes wide and pleading as they met Frank’s. He leaned forward and they gasped in unison when Gerard’s body opened up, the head of Frank’s cock slipping past the ring of muscles. “Keep

looking at me, sweetie," he encouraged breathlessly. "Eyes on me, baby."

Gerard's arms finally found him and he curled them around Frank's neck. They were shaking slightly from exertion, and Frank turned his head to the side, pressing a kiss to Gerard's forearm.

"Frank?" Gerard whispered when Frank slid an inch further. God, it was so good; so tight and hot, all he wanted was to bend Gerard in half and *thrust*. He gritted his teeth and slowed his hips even more, waiting for Gerard to adjust.

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm in love with you."

Frank's hips snapped forward and Gerard's moan rang in his ears. His short nails dug into the back of Frank's neck. He slid beneath him, rolled his hips and gasped when Frank rested fully inside him.

"Jesus, Gee," Frank rasped, shaking the hair away from his eyes. He had a fleeting thought that he could come just from this – from Gerard tensing beneath him, looking up at him, clenching around his cock. "You really do play dirty."

"Ahh, but it worked," Gerard smiled. "And I meant it. I will be even more in love with you if you finally fuck me, though."

Frank's heart seized. For a few seconds, he could just look at Gerard beneath him, splayed on *his* pillow with a blissed smile. He lowered himself onto his elbow again and reached a hand to brush his fingers over the now barely visible bruise around Gerard's eye. Was it possible to love someone after a month? Maybe it wasn't, but Frank didn't find it in himself to care. He stretched his neck and caught Gerard's lips in a kiss, rolling his hips at the same time, and swallowed Gerard's next moan.

"I love you," he whispered, pressing his forehead to Gerard's. "I fucking love you."

He gripped Gerard's side and slid back inside him, and Gerard's back arched. He held him through it, setting a rhythm that was bound to drive them both insane, the slow, deep thrusts that made his head spin. Gerard tried to reach between their bodies but Frank caught his wrists and held them to his chest, making him whine.

"You can," he told him firmly when Gerard's hips lifted from the bed to meet him halfway. "I know you can come like this. Can you try for me?"

He angled his hips and thrust harder. Gerard cried out, bending backward. "Yeah," he panted out. "Yeah, I— I can."

Frank smiled. "Good."

He gripped him tighter and doubled his efforts, and that finally seemed to do the trick. Gerard was moaning with each slide of his cock inside him now, the muscles of his thighs trembling hard around Frank's hips and nails scratching at Frank's back. He was babbling something, words Frank mostly couldn't understand apart from broken '*I love you's* pushed past his lips here and there. He wished he had the energy to kiss him through it, but Gerard never let him move too far away. He held him in his arms so tightly Frank was sure he'd have bruises sprinkled between his tattoos the next day.

He loved it. At least Gerard wouldn't be the only bruised one.

“Frank, I’m gonna—,” Gerard finally gasped, pushing at his shoulder. Frank leaned slightly back but kept thrusting, his own elbows wobbling dangerously under his weight. “Oooh *fuck*, please—”

“Yeah, baby, just like that,” he praised. “I’m so close, Gee, I’m so fucking close.”

Gerard convulsed against him. When Frank stole a look down between their bodies, his cock was wet and so hard it had to be painful. He bit his lip and glanced up before wrapping his hand around it, and that was all it took. He squeezed and slid his fingers up, and Gerard came with a broken sob, Frank’s name barely a choked-up sound as he arched and shook. Frank’s hips stopped abruptly as he watched him like that – mouth open, tears shining in the corners of his eyes, a deep blush of his cheeks and chest. He wanted to ask him if he was okay, reach over to thumb at the lonely tear that slid down Gerard’s face, but he caught his smile just as Gerard’s eyelids fluttered open.

He clenched around him, and Frank hissed.

“Come on,” Gerard whispered, pulling him back down. “Fuck me. Please, I need you to come inside me, Frankie. Please.”

“Christ,” Frank’s head fell forward as he moved back onto his knees, pulling at Gerard’s thighs in the process. Gerard was grinning lazily as he hooked his legs over Frank’s shoulders, lifting his hips from the bed. The angle was so much better like that, and Frank snapped his hips forward with a grunt. “God, you’re so—”

“How am I?” Gerard cooed. He rested his hands on top of Frank’s around his thighs.

“*Stunning*.”

“Good,” Gerard whispered. He waited until Frank met his eyes again before he spoke again. “Fuck me like you love me.”

Frank let himself go after that. He gripped Gerard’s legs tightly and slid inside him in short, rough shoves, hips rocking fast, and the sound of skin connecting filling the bedroom. Gerard was grunting so sweetly, too, voice completely broken as he encouraged Frank to go faster, to fuck him harder. The pressure kept building and building, the knot in Frank’s abdomen tightening, and he wanted nothing more than to grip Gerard’s hips, flip him around and bury himself inside to the hilt.

“*Sweetheart*,” he moaned when he felt the first kick of his orgasm. Gerard clenched around him again, and Frank shuddered as the feeling spread like shock traveling through his entire body. He slapped Gerard’s hands away, spread his legs, and delivered the last bruising thrust as he came inside him, falling on top of Gerard’s chest with a whine.

“Yeah,” Gerard whispered. “I love you, too.”

His feet fell against the bed with a dull thud, and his hands came to rest at the back of Frank’s head. Frank tried to lift himself, mindful of Gerard’s bruised ribs, but Gerard just chuckled and pressed him back down. They were both breathing harshly as Frank finally pulled his hips back far enough to slip out of Gerard, eliciting a soft hiss, but that was as far as he could go. It felt good to have Gerard’s fingers card through his hair, scratching lightly, and his knees bracketing him between them. Frank heaved a sigh as he turned his head and pressed a kiss above Gerard’s heart.

“Did you actually mean it?” Frank found himself asking. He didn’t need to clarify; Gerard knew precisely what he was referring to. He expected some hesitance now that they were both calming down, their breathing slowed, and the air colder around their naked bodies, but he felt Gerard nod, and his hands tightened.

“I did,” he shrugged. When Frank forced himself to look up, Gerard was gazing into the distance. He still smiled when he felt Frank’s eyes on him. “If *you* didn’t mean it, things are going to become very awkward.”

Frank could joke about it. He had about a million snarky remarks ready to be fired, but Gerard’s hand twitched in his hair a little, a nervous gesture masked perfectly with a blinding smile, and Frank didn’t want to make jokes anymore. It had been hard to bare his soul for Gerard before, but as they lay there together, naked and vulnerable, he understood he couldn’t keep pretending things just happened in the heat of the moment. What he had said, what he had felt, it didn’t go away. Frank just needed to get it together and risk getting wounded to protect Gerard from getting hurt first.

He grunted as he moved up his body. Gerard’s eyes flickered back to his face and there it was again – this utterly fragile hope that he could crush with one word or one wrong gesture. He smiled and kissed him instead, long and soft, and kept kissing until he felt the tension evaporate from Gerard’s body and his grip on his hair loosening.

“Look at me, Gee,” he said as he moved away, brushing Gerard’s sweaty hair away from his eyes. “I don’t know if it makes sense. It probably doesn’t, I’ve known you for a month, but I think I’ve never gone through so much shit with anyone else as I did with you,” he smiled wider when Gerard frowned and rubbed his thumb between his eyebrows. “Don’t frown, sweetheart.”

“It’s not the most romantic thing you could have said to me, you know?”

“I think it is,” Frank disagreed. “It was horrible. Whenever you told me something painful about your life, I just wanted to go back in time and save you from it. Every time you cried I just wanted to find a way to make you happy. This,” he cupped Gerard’s face and touched his bruises again. “I know you can’t stand more violence, but Jesus, Gee, I wanted to hurt them for this. I wouldn’t because you asked me not to, but I wanted to. And now, here, nothing changed. I still want to save you. I still want to make you happy.”

“You still wanna beat the shit out of people for me?” Gerard raised an eyebrow in question, but Frank could see how he was biting his lip to stop himself from smiling. He tugged at it gently until Gerard parted his mouth and released it.

“Oh, baby, absolutely,” he grinned. “I would go through hell and back for you, and if this doesn’t tell you how I feel about you, then I don’t know what will.”

“How do you feel?” Gerard asked. *Whiny*, Frank thought to himself and rolled his eyes before kissing him once more.

“I love you.”

Gerard pulled his head back on his chest, and Frank went easily this time. He just wanted to stay like this for a little longer. Some arrangements needed to be made – one of them being Gerard moving back to his flat – but Frank pushed these thoughts away. This was good for the time being. This was great.

“You could have simply bought me flowers,” Gerard said after a moment.

Frank grinned and closed his eyes, tapping his fingers over Gerard’s heart.

“I will.”

***

Frank rounded the corner just in time to see Patrick reaching for the door handle to close it. His legs burned from running, and his lungs felt like he was going to puke them out, but he forced himself to strain his body for these additional few yards. He knew he was late, terribly so. His watch was unrelenting and kept showing him the twenty minutes that had passed since nine o'clock, and Frank swore at himself. He swore at Doug and Travis, too, but mostly at himself, even if the excuse he had was honestly one of the best.

"Pat, wait!"

"Frank! Oh man, I was beginning to think you wouldn't show."

"No, I'm here," Frank finally reached the entrance and leaned heavily against the wall, trying to catch his breath. "Holy fuck, I think I'm dying."

"Did you run?"

"Hell yeah, I ran," Frank nodded and forced himself to grin. "Has it started yet? It must have started."

"Yeah, sorry. He was looking for you," Pat clasped a heavy hand on Frank's shoulder. "I told him you were coming."

"Did he believe you?"

"What do you think?" Pat smiled. "The only person he doesn't bitch about is you. I don't know how you do it."

Frank straightened his back and smiled, waving a bouquet in the air. He wondered for a moment if Gerard would consider it sweet or rude that Frank was more late than he could have been because he had had to stop on his way to the club to buy the flowers, and then decided he probably wouldn't mind. Flowers were just an addition to what Frank had brought with him tonight, and in the long run, they would probably matter the least.

Pat reached over and grabbed the bouquet delicately. It almost looked comical, such subtle beauty combined with his security guard posture and bald head. He squinted and reached over, ripping the price tag away.

"Oh, you're good," Frank pointed at him when Pat handed the bouquet back to him. "Who the hell puts price tags on flowers?"

"Security eyes," Pat grinned at him. "Okay, enough chit-chat. You're going to miss the performance. Go on."

He held the door open for him, and Frank slithered by, descending into the familiar darkness of the club. He could almost operate it without looking at this point – he knew the number of steps leading downstairs and could avoid crashing into tables even with his eyes closed. He didn't stop in his customary place at the back of the room this time, however, and inched closer to the front, keeping close to the wall to not obscure the view of the guests.

And what a view that was.

Frank leaned against the bar and winked at Michelle as she smiled at him. His customary drink was ready in seconds, making him believe she had it prepared for him from the very start, and he nodded at her before he settled his eyes on the stage. It would never stop amazing him. No matter how often he would see Gerard up in the spotlight, it felt like he would always have his breath taken away. This was where he belonged, and Frank could not be more proud to see him there.

He was awfully late, though. Gerard was close to finishing up, his voice more hoarse the way it always was at the end of his performances, and his outfit slightly disheveled now that he had had time to play with it. The black ribbon around the collar of his shirt was untied, barely hanging on, and he had shed the sweater Frank had helped him choose this morning, the red and white fabric crumbled by his feet. One of his stockings was rolled down to his ankle, too, and Frank grinned as Gerard twirled around, the skimpy black skirt whirling around him. It made the guys sitting in the front row reach compulsively for their drinks, and Frank wished they would look his way. He wanted to salute them; he knew what it meant for your mouth to go dry at the sight of Gerard's thighs.

He was spotted the moment Gerard walked off stage. He smiled at first, forgetting he was supposed to be angry at Frank for being late, and Frank snickered as he saw a frown forming a few seconds later. Gerard still walked over to him, and Frank gripped the ribbon and pulled him down for a kiss before he could utter as much as a word. It was his favorite part of any of Gerard's performances. Frank was not a jealous man, but he couldn't help feeling a little possessive each time, kissing Gerard deep and hard in front of everyone who had been drooling on top of their tables just seconds before. The eyes of everyone were on them, and Frank smiled into the kiss, wrapping an arm around Gerard's waist and pressing their bodies together.

"You're late," Gerard mumbled against his lips, sighing when Frank licked at his lower lip. "Stop it. I'm supposed to be pissed off at you."

"Come on baby, I bought you flowers," Frank chuckled when Gerard slumped against him, making no move to wriggle away from his touch. His back was hot beneath the shirt, and Frank felt a spike of arousal shoot through him when he slipped one leg between Gerard's, the skirt pooling over his thigh. "And I come bearing news."

"Good news or bad news?" Gerard asked, pushing his legs further apart. That had happened a couple of times in the past, too, and Frank gripped Gerard's hip tightly in a warning. He didn't want Michelle to yell at them again for humping each other next to her bar.

"Great news."

He pushed Gerard slightly away to hand him the flowers and froze for a moment to watch. The frown was no longer present on his face as he lowered his head and sniffed the bouquet, a pleased smile showing up again. Frank bought Gerard flowers often, abandoning the idea of leaving them for special occasions only and stopping by the florist so many times they knew him by name by that point. Gerard was always as happy as if it was the first time. His eyes were big and round when he looked up and Frank was ready when a kiss came – slower this time, barely a peck of their lips as a way for Gerard to say thank you.

Frank wasn't done with surprises. He reached into his bag and held his breath as he pulled out the book. It almost felt hot in his hands, fresh out of the printing press. Frank knew it by heart already – the red scarf on the cover, the delicate font of the title, Frank's name nestled next to Gerard's as two co-authors. He knew the inside of it even better. The stories ran through his head freely now, finally locked into text, and it almost felt like closing a chapter. Everything Gerard had gone through was now just a story in a book, and he had a chance to start a new one or write an

Epilogue. Frank's heart skipped a beat at the realization that he would still be considered a co-author for that work.

"It's the first one," he whispered as he pressed the book into Gerard's hands. "I want your approval before we move on with bulk printing, but I think it's perfect. I wouldn't add or subtract anything."

Gerard looked down as if he couldn't quite believe it. Frank took the bouquet back from him when Gerard held his biography like it was going to fall apart in his hands, his breath held and eyes even wider as he opened it up. His fingers ran over the front page title and slipped to Frank's name printed beneath.

"*Through the Labyrinth to the House,*" he mouthed. "Frank, this is— oh my God, you actually did it."

"*We* did it," Frank shook his head. "Do you like it?"

"Do I… Frankie, this is incredible," Gerard smiled before he leaned in and kissed Frank on the mouth, hard and short. "Oh my God, I love you."

He laughed and brought Gerard close again, blindly putting the flowers on the counter behind him. Ignorant now of the club guests around them, he cupped Gerard's face with his hands and kissed him properly again, letting all his pride and love show through the gesture. When Gerard folded in his arms and pressed into a hug, Frank skimmed his hands up his spine until he could hold onto the back of his head and play with his hair.

"I love you, too," he whispered to him. "And I'm sorry I was late, but I actually have an excuse for that, too. Some news broke, and work was fucking crazy. I had to bribe Travis to do overtime for me so I could be here tonight."

"Travis is the champ," Gerard agreed, words muffled against Frank's neck. "What news? You look tired."

Frank *felt* tired. For the entire day, he hadn't even had time to call Gerard and let him know what had happened, and he didn't mention it, but Travis hadn't been the only one he had bribed that day. Lone had been highly skeptical when Frank had begged him over the phone to stay quiet for at least a couple more hours, and Frank had hoped Gerard wouldn't be anywhere near a television or a radio to hear about it there. They were running a massive article about it in tomorrow's newspaper, anyway, and Frank had a draft of it tucked into his bag as well, but he needed to be the one to tell Gerard. Lone had understood that much, at least. Frank still couldn't believe he was friends with the police.

"I'm exhausted, sweetheart, but it's great news," he promised. He made sure Gerard was paying attention, pulling him back to look him in the eyes, and smiled. "The case is closed. We won."

Gerard frowned again. "What case?"

"The verdict has been announced today, and they didn't go easy on the fucker," Frank explained, watching how the realization slowly made its way to Gerard's eyes. "He got life without the possibility of parole. I mean, I kind of figured after they found out about this sixteen years old boy, but still."

"No, wait. Frank, *what* are you saying?"

"You know what I'm saying," Frank brought Gerard forward with a hand on his nape. "Markus is in jail. He's never walking out of there. The case is closed, and we won."

Gerard deflated. He fell against Frank with his entire weight like the wind had been knocked out of him, and Frank caught him, tailbone connecting painfully with the bar. He grunted when Gerard's arms came around his neck, slow and sluggish like he couldn't entirely control them, and then sighed when he felt him tremble against him. He caught Michelle's worried look and shook his head, adjusting his grip on Gerard's hips.

"Frank," he heard after a moment. It sounded like a sob.

"Shh, it's okay, it's done," he pressed a kiss to Gerard's temple. "It's all done with now. You're safe."

Gerard shivered again. There was definitely wetness on Frank's neck as he straightened back up, tears in his eyes and a smile so blinding it made Frank's heart skip a beat. He started laughing in choked-off, broken bursts of air, and Frank stroked a thumb over his jawline and allowed himself to laugh as well.

"Oh fuck, Frank," Gerard shook his head as he gripped his forearms. "I can't fucking believe it. You're kidding, right? You're joking."

"I wouldn't joke about that," Frank almost took offense at that; almost. "You're ready to get out of here now? I think this deserves a celebration, and we still need to get the rest of your stuff over tonight."

"Weren't you tired?" Gerard's eyebrows raised, but he was already gathering the bouquet back into his arms and tugging Frank toward his dressing room. "We can leave it for tomorrow. I'm not returning the apartment keys for another three days."

Frank knew that, but it didn't really matter. He wanted this chapter closed for good and a new one to open tonight, with Gerard in *their* apartment, in *their* bed. He hugged himself to Gerard's back as soon as the door to the dressing room was closed and pressed a kiss to his neck, feeling Gerard's hands clasp around his on his stomach. God, he was really fucking happy.

"No, sweetheart, never too tired for this," he said when Gerard turned and looked at him with a smile. "Never too tired to make you a part of my life."

End Notes

References for those interested:
* Gerard's first performance in the story is to a song called "Muse" by OCAD
* Gerard's first-ever performance with the teddy bear is a scene from the movie "House of Boys" (2009)
* The scene of Gerard dancing with Frank was based on the video of Bachata by Cornel and Rithika (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCMAFEkyibc&ab_channel=dancespace008)

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